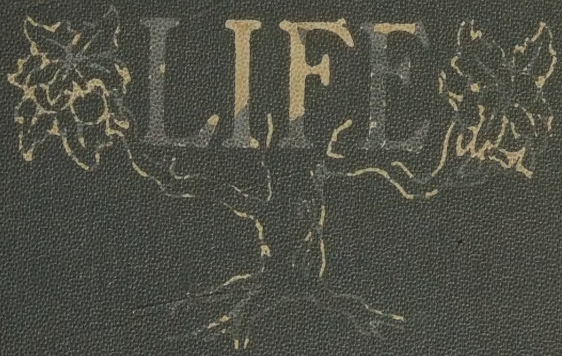
MY WIFE'S HIDDEN LIFE



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FOREWORD

It may be asked why I have voluntarily laid bare the story of my married life, and what possible good such a narrative could do.

I began it partly to obtain relief from the strain of intolerable regret, and partly because I thought that the mere setting down of the facts might help me to a better understanding of my own shortcomings, of my almost complete failure to grasp or appreciate the nature of the woman I married.

Also it has occurred to me that this plain, unadorned narration might possibly be of use to other men, who may be tempted as I was.

During the writing of these chapters I have endeavored to keep myself well in hand, to abstain from too much morbid retrospection, or surrender to the natural feelings of remorse and sorrow inseparable from my experience. And when all is done, there remains the inexorable fact of my failure in the most sacred and exacting relation of life.

Uppermost in my mind as I lay down my pen are these words of Browning:

"What she felt the while, must I think?
Love's so different with us men.
Dying for my sake, white and pink—
Can't we touch these bubbles then,
But they break?"

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CHAPTER I

I first met Hester at a ball given by the Lacys at the Shire Hall in Helston to celebrate the coming-out of their second daughter Caroline.

Ned Lacy, the eldest son, was my greatest chum in Helston, while the elder sister Maud had been a sort of sweetheart of mine since we were boy and girl together.

Ned's father was the leading draper in Helston, while I was the only son of the manager of the Helston branch of the Town and Counties Bank.

In those days Helston, though only eighteen miles from London, was a remote and rather exclusive country town.

Now it has been absorbed by Greater London and has changed its name.

For obvious reasons I will hide the place under an assumed name, for my story concerns real people, many of whom are still alive.

You can now reach Helston by tram from the Northern Heights, and it has become a favorite residential suburb, without altogether losing its old-world charm.

In my day it was a small quiet backwater much

behind the times, though it cherished a very high opinion of itself both politically and socially.

The Lacys, I may explain here, though very well off, were not received in the inner circle of Helston society, which was largely professional and military. My family was kept on the outside also, owing to my father's complete neglect of all social amenities.

He was a very well-educated, gentlemanly man, and I have been told that he changed a good deal after my mother's death, which took place when she was thirty-one, leaving him with two young children, my sister Jane and myself. He never married again. I believe that he never fully recovered from the shock of her death, which caused an alteration in all his habits.

He lost interest in much that formerly interested him, and developed that odd idiosyncrasy sometimes noticeable in certain men of parts, a predilection for the society of those socially and intellectually his inferiors.

Persisted in, this curious trait invariably ends in deterioration, since it is impossible for any one who makes a habit of stooping to preserve both breadth and dignity of outlook.

He was an excellent bank manager, popular with his clients, and the branch flourished during all the years he was at its head.

At his wife's death he invited a distant connection of hers to come and look after the house. We called her Aunt Sophia, though she was only our

mother's cousin; she died when Jane was seventeen, after which my sister became the domestic head of the house.

Perhaps it was this early responsibility which imparted to my sister that singular gravity which seemed to invest her at times like an impenetrable veil. Jane and I were quite good friends, but not intimate. She did not care for my circle of friends, and had very few of her own.

Looking back, I fully realize now the loneliness of her younger life, and the power solitude must have had in the development of her character and gifts, undreamed of by those who lived with her.

The Lacys, at that time, lived in a delightful, roomy, old-fashioned house above their place of business. They were a numerous and happy family, enjoying life to the full. They were a jolly, if rather a vulgar crew; there was no stint of good food and homely license in their house, which was very acceptable to a lad who found his own home deadly dull.

My father did not trouble himself about my future. When I left Helston Grammar School he simply made a place for me in the bank, where it was popularly supposed that I should one day succeed him.

My outlook and surroundings being so much circumscribed, it was a great thing for me to get out into the wider atmosphere of the Lacy household. Ned was a handsome, dashing fellow, much in request socially, and his father did not stint him in the matter of money.

He was rather a fast youth in his early twenties, but pulled up at twenty-five and became engaged to the daughter of a retired captain in the army, which gave the Lacys a big social lift.

Her people were not keen on the match, but were reconciled to it by the handsome settlements old Lacy agreed to make on the young couple. She was a fine-looking girl, a year older than Ned, and had a great deal of power over him. It may be said here that Ned Lacy's marriage was the making of him in every way.

After his engagement was announced, Mrs. Lacy persuaded her husband to build her a new double-fronted house on the Hill, which was the name of the most select Helston suburb, and the ball at the Shire Hall, though given ostensibly for Carrie, was of the nature of a house warming.

We were all asked, but my father, as usual, declined. He disliked the Lacys intensely, and often chipped me about my intimacy with them. He thought them common and not good enough for me to associate with.

I might have retorted with perfect truth that as he had never taken the smallest trouble to create a social atmosphere for us, we were entitled to seek our own. But we seldom wrangled. It was only at a very rare time that the narrowness of my home life irritated me. It was in reality much harder for Jane, for she did not make friends easily, and a girl is hampered as no man ever can be.

Jane also disliked the Lacys, all except Carrie, who

was rather young to be a companion for her. The two younger children, Flo and Bertha, commonly called "the Babe," had, in pursuance of their mother's soaring ambitions, been sent to a boarding school in Brussels. They were permitted to come over for the week-end in charge of a governess for the purpose of attending Carrie's coming-out ball, an occurrence which was destined to alter the whole current of my life.

I have already hinted that there had been some romantic passages between me and Maud Lacy, who was a handsome, showy girl, invariably attracting the attention of men wherever she went.

She had told me, however, that nothing on earth would induce her to marry a poor man, and that a bank manager did not come into her scheme of things at all. This was speech plain enough to absolve me from any feeling of responsibility, and we flirted outrageously, and continued to be the best of friends, while everybody else was extremely anxious to convert us into something nearer.

Mrs. Lacy was an excellent and devoted mother, but Ned and Maud were her favorites. While she could not be actively unkind or neglectful of anybody, she certainly showed these two exceptional indulgence. Her treatment of the younger members of her family often reminded me of old Emile Leblanc, our French master at the Grammar School, who, on being congratulated on the arrival of his third child after a lapse of several years, observed, with an expressive shrug:

"Ah oui, elle est charmante, mais elle n'est pas necessaire!"

The Shire Hall was admirably adapted for dance-giving, and presented a pretty spectacle on that eventful night. Mrs. Lacy had spared no expense. The stairs were richly carpeted, and banked all the way up with flowering plants. She received her guests at the entrance to the Council Chamber and bestowed her heartiest greeting on us when we arrived.

"So good of you to come, Jane, when we all know you don't care for this sort of thing. Well, how do you think it looks, Gilbert? I expected you a quarter of an hour before nine, instead of twenty minutes after. Ned is not a bit of good. I shall expect you to keep an eye on everything."

These few words will serve to indicate the position I occupied in the Lacy household, where I was treated precisely as a son. I had assisted in all the preparations, had engaged the band in London from the same huge emporium which was providing the supper, which was to be the talk of Helston presently. Mrs. Lacy intended to shine as a hostess, but it was a hopeless effort so far as social recognition was concerned. In Helston one might spend a whole fortune, and still be barred entrance to even one of the small, flat Georgian houses on North Plain where the elect lived.

I knew a great many people, and was kept busy for several minutes greeting them. Dancing had already begun, and the ballroom presented a very

pretty and animated scene. It was a very ordinary Helston crowd, though there were a few men outside of the Lacy circle who possessed the magic key to the inner shrine of Helston society. But all their feminine relations were conspicuous by their absence, though Mrs. Lacy had not hesitated to invite several whom she only knew as customers at the shop. Among these young men was Hubert Parfitt, only son and heir of the Parfitts of Gresley Manor. He seemed attracted by Maud, whose daring red outline he shadowed all the evening. He was rather a vacuous youth with a willowy figure, and a small head perched like an ostrich's on a long neck.

He wore a monocle, which was perpetually falling off, and he looked like the most exaggerated type of the genus dude.

The younger Lacys openly mimicked and made fun of him.

There were some few other men in Parfitt's set who had come for the fun of the thing, and to see whether Mrs. Lacy would do them well.

Maud was waltzing with Parfitt, which was extremely bad taste in her so early in the evening, there being many girls unprovided with partners. Ned was with his fiancée, of course, and there was without doubt plenty for me to do. I set about doing it at once. I felt no jealous thrill as I observed Maud in her partner's arms, even while she threw me a mocking and triumphant glance from her fine, black eyes. I had perhaps seen too much of Maud in her father's house, and there was nothing of that

mysterious elusiveness about her which attracts a man. I have often wondered why more women do not probe the secret of lasting power over men. It is this very quality of elusiveness and unexpectedness which Maud Lacy conspicuously lacked. If it entered more largely into the scheme of matrimony, there would be fewer stale, flat, and unprofitable homes.

I remember making a remark of this kind to a big, slow Scotchman named Yuill, with whom I used to travel from North Finchley to the city after I had established a home there, but he looked at me with a derisive stare.

"I 'm for none of that devilment at my fireside, Trent. A man wants to be sure of what he 'll find there, and know that he 'll find it always."

My pulses did not so much as stir at sight of Maud Lacy in Parfitt's arms. I looked away and began to whip up various idle youths who wanted to be partnered. There were about ninety persons in the room, and the guests had nearly all arrived. There would be few late-comers in the Lacy's set. It is the middle classes who are punctual in most of their engagements.

There were plenty of dancing men and pretty girls. Carrie was slipping about doing her best to make people happy, not appearing to think that, as it was her coming-out party, special attention should have been paid to her.

Everybody liked Carrie Lacy, though she was a person you sometimes forgot about. Then, when

you saw her, you wondered why you dared to forget. She had a sweet, rather piquant look on her demure little face, which was enhanced by the quaint, quaker-like way in which she arranged her hair, rippling down over her ears.

She was the exact opposite in every respect of her brilliant sister.

"There you are, Gilbert. I 'm so glad you 've come. You'll help ever so much. I've been watching how splendidly you get these lazy boys to dance. Now I want to introduce you to somebody, so that you'll be kind to her."

"I haven't seen Flo or the Babe yet. I suppose they've arrived," I said rather unwillingly. I should have liked a dance with Carrie myself.

"Oh, yes, about seven. Miss Lawrence brought them. She 's so nice. I should n't mind being at La Grenade myself, if I had her to teach me."

"Where is she?" I asked interestedly.

"Come and see," said Carrie, slipping her kindly hand on my arm. She took me to the sitting-out place, which was ideally arranged. And there, quite suddenly in the shade of a big palm, with the Babe squatted beside her, I saw the woman who was to influence my life for all time.

How shall I describe Hester? I see her before me now in so many varying forms. That night she wore a black frock, something very simple, I am sure, for the keynote of her personal attire was always simplicity. It was cut low at the neck, however, and, unrelieved by any white trimming,

showed the whiteness of her skin. She had an oval face and soft brown hair, neither frizzled nor tortured, though it had a natural wave which no brushing could smooth out. There were quantities of it, which, wound in coils about her head, gave her a somewhat stately look.

She was not very tall, but her figure was graceful, and she had small feet and hands. I felt distinctly conscious of a strange thrill as I was introduced to her, and as I watched her pretty fingers playing with the long chain about her neck, I longed to touch them.

There was something at once sweet and wistful in her expression, and yet a little remoteness which drew me. When she smiled, however, her face quite changed, and became illuminated, as if with a sudden ray of sunshine.

"This is Gilbert Trent, Miss Lawrence. I dare say Flo and Babe have told you all about him," said Carrie. "He 's Ned's greatest chum, and simply lives at our house, don't you, Gib? Babe, we had better go and find out what mummy is doing. I am sure she must be getting very tired."

I blessed Carrie for her tact; I believe she understood even then that I was simply dying for an opportunity to talk with Miss Lawrence alone.

"It gives me uncommon pleasure to meet you, Miss Lawrence," I said impressively. "I hope you will give me some dances yet. May I see your program?"

"I don't think I wish to dance," she answered,

with her quiet, bright smile. "It is so much more interesting to watch the people. This is my first introduction to English society, and I think it was very kind of Mrs. Lacy to permit me to come here to-night."

Her voice was so friendly that I felt encouraged to ask her to sit out with me. I noticed again the beauty of her hands, as they still played with the little cross attached to her chain.

They were exquisitely molded—characteristic, sensitive hands, only possessed by persons of refined and lofty nature.

There was something so attractive and restful about her, that I felt more and more drawn toward her. There was nothing restful about the Lacys.

"Do you mean that you have never been in England before? But you *are* English?" I began.

"Oh, yes! But I was born in India, and my only experience of England has been in passing through London to the Continent. I was at school at La Grenade when my father died; and I stopped on through the kindness of the dear principals. I am earning my living there now."

"I am very sorry for you," I said quickly.

"Oh, why? I am very happy. I have congenial work, and a kind home with two of the finest gentlewomen in the world. There are very few continental schools to compare with La Grenade," she said warmly.

"Mrs. Lacy will be pleased to hear that, I am sure. She has been anxious about Flo and the Babe."

"They are dear children, and I am very glad to have the opportunity of seeing their home. It helps me to understand them better."

At that moment Flo, then in the acute flapper stage, her large feet showing aggressively under her skimpy ball frock, and her big hair bow of blue ribbon flapping wildly, came flying up to us.

"Mum wants you, Gib; she's simply aching to tell you what she thinks of you for deserting her. You must positively run, or she won't forgive you."

I apologized to Miss Lawrence as I rose to obey my hostess's behest. As I walked away I heard the flapper make a bold, unwarranted, and wholly unnecessary statement regarding me.

"Is n't he nice? An old flame of Maud's; but they've quarrelled or something. Anyway, it's off, but he's a rattling good sort."

CHAPTER II

Mrs. Lacy had left her stand at the head of the staircase, and was keeping a general's eye on the proceedings.

When I found her she received me with a half-smile and a reproving shake of the head.

"I hope you don't mind my sending for you, Gilbert. I simply can't afford to waste one of my best dancing men on a governess. Go at once and ask Miss Briggs for the lancers."

Miss Briggs was the plain and rather shrewish daughter of the Mayor, who was the fish and poultry dealer in the town. He was the first teetotal Mayor Helston had ever had, and had only accepted the office, then going begging, on the understanding that he should not be expected to provide cake and wine banquets, or any other kind of entertainment costing money and necessitating the presence of strong drink.

For these obvious reasons Briggs was unpopular as a Mayor, and they were already pressing Mr. Lacy to reconsider all his former refusals, and allow himself to be nominated for the following year. He *was* considering it. The reason he had refused before was that he was a shy man in public, and

dreaded the inevitable speechifying. This was extraordinary in a man who, in private life, was something of a bore, but it is not so unusual as one might think.

I looked a little blank at Mrs. Lacy's suggestion, for Clara Briggs was no favorite of mine. Her tongue was both sharp and spiteful, and she had a way of making even a decent kind of chap feel like a worm. I was not particularly vain, but I liked to feel comfortable and satisfied with myself. I knew that I was passably good-looking, and that I had a certain modest position. Clara Briggs made me feel that I was not even passable.

She was a small, scraggy young woman, with a thin neck and a shrill voice. She dressed in the worst possible taste. That night she wore a heavenly shade of blue that matched the eyes of a child, a shade such as very few women, and these only specially fair and delicately colored, could afford to choose. There was a quantity of coarse, string-colored lace about the bodice, I remember, and enveloping her skinny arms, which did not in the least help to tone it down. She looked simply appalling.

"All right, madam," I answered ruefully to my hostess, with a sort of mock humility mingled with affection. "I'll do my duty at whatever cost."

"That's a good boy; you see, I treat you like my own son," she said, with an answering affection in her kind eyes. "Ned is positively no use to-night, and, as for Cyril, I suppose he is already in the

supper room. If you really want to escape the toils, Gib, you must get engaged."

"I'm thinking about it," I answered with a smile over my shoulder, as I made my way to the side of Miss Briggs. She accepted me as a partner at once, and began to criticize everything while we waited for the dance to begin. She had hardly anything kind to say, and was specially hard on the extravagant frocks. She had a certain smartness of expression, which sometimes passes for cleverness. But real cleverness has depths, which mellow it. Clara's had none. Presently it was Hester Lawrence, dancing with young Captain Mauld, who came under review.

"Who is that odd-looking person Captain Mauld has got hold of? There are a lot of odd people here to-night, aren't there? But she's quite a stranger. Do you think Mrs. Lacy has been discriminating in her invitations, Mr. Trent?"

"I don't know, but it's a jolly party," I answered rather shortly, for somehow the sight of Miss Lawrence dancing with Mauld, easily the handsomest man in the room, disquieted me.

"Of course, Mrs. Lacy always does things well. Papa wonders how they can afford it. It is a good business, of course, but businesses have to be husbanded. It never does to encroach on capital."

"I haven't heard that the Lacys are encroaching on capital," I said, just for the fun of the thing, and to hear what she would say next.

"Well, I never gossip, but, *entre nous*"—(one of

Clara's most objectionable habits was her prolific use of French phrases, very often quite in the wrong place)—"the new house on the Hill and all this flutter may be something of a blind. Nobody need be surprised if things, other kinds of things, happen next year."

I smiled over her head, for old Lacy banked with us, and his financial state had never been sounder.

"Let's hope we shan't hear anything disagreeable, Miss Briggs. Nice house, Hill Rise, isn't it? You must persuade the Mayor to build you one on the Hill."

"Oh, we are quite simple people, Mr. Trent. We like to pay our way and keep a substantial margin. Papa is a plain man, but his business ideals are high."

"Quite right," I murmured fatuously. "Wish there were a few more like him."

"But you're not telling me who the plain girl in black with Captain Mauld is. Such bad taste to have a train in a ballroom. She evidently doesn't know that the latest fashion in dance frocks is to have them quite clear of the ground."

"She probably knows, but couldn't afford to have the newest thing. She's a governess from the school where Flo and Bertha are in Brussels. But I must say she manages her train rather well."

She had it over her arm, and the froth of a lace-trimmed petticoat was about her dainty feet.

"Oh, I say, a governess! and just look at her underskirt! Do you call that decent, Mr. Trent?"

"It's uncommonly pretty," I answered with perfect truth. "And she's a beautiful dancer."

It may be wondered that I should remember such a foolish conversation after the lapse of five-and-twenty years. But that night stands out like a cameo in the book of remembrances. As I write I am far enough away from my solitary den in North Finchley, the sport of a thousand memories bitter and sweet. At this moment I see the brilliantly lighted Shire Hall as vividly as if I were under its decorated roof, the animated throng, and, above all, the graceful figure of my Hester in the dance. I feel anew the odd thrill of jealously which sent a pang through me at sight of Mauld's close attention to her. She was much in request after that, and supper was well advanced when I once more found her alone. I asked her to allow me to take her to supper, though Mrs. Lacy had ruthlessly commandeered me again, and directed my attention to several wall-flowers.

"No, no, madam!" I laughingly replied. "I have done my duty, and must now claim the reward of merit."

"What's that?" she asked interestedly.

"I am going to take Miss Lawrence to supper if she'll allow me."

"Oh, but Gilbert, it's totally unnecessary! I assure you she won't expect it. Anybody can take her. She can go with the children, or I will get a hold of Bob a little later. Don't trouble about her."

Bob was her husband, and she mentioned his

name to mollify me, seeing, I suppose, that I was determined.

"She's having quite a good time, really — in fact, she's had some of the best partners. Some girls in her position would have refused them, but, of course, she could not be expected to know any better."

Mrs. Lacy was not in the least angry; it was only her middle-class point of view.

"I'll return to the path of duty without fail after supper," I answered as I hastened away, assured that if I dallied any longer I should miss my chance.

I found her where I had left her, quite alone, and she was pleased to see me again. I asked her to supper humbly, even beseechingly, as a man solicits that which he really and fervently desires.

"I am sorry, but I have promised Captain Mauld. Here he comes!"

"And when am I to have my dances?" I asked hotly. "Do you know you have given them all away but one?"

"Have I? But then you see I didn't know the engagement was binding," she answered merrily. "I'll give you the after-supper dance if Mrs. Lacy doesn't mind. I expect I shall have to take the children home very soon. I have enjoyed myself. I had no idea a real party could be so delightful."

She looked so animated at the moment, so joyous, and so young, that her whole appearance seemed to alter and improve. It was always like that.

There seemed to be two Hesters — one with the quiet, immovable face and deep, inscrutable eyes, and

a radiant, child-like Hester, that sparkled and shone. Ah, me! to think that I, who had the incomparable chance, should not have kept the radiance forever at my side! It was left to others to touch the delicate springs of her being, and to bring forth all that was lovely and fine from the rich recesses, while I, poor fool and blind . . .

"This is my privilege, I think, Trent," said Mauld's voice at my elbow, and as I turned I hated his handsome looks, his red coat, his well-set-up, soldierly figure. I remembered having read or heard somewhere that all women loved a uniform; doubtless Hester would be no exception to the rule.

I went off somewhat gloomily to release some wall-flowers, the more uninteresting and wilted the better, as I could not have Hester. The supper half-hour was rendered unbearable to me by being obliged to observe Mauld's gallant care of his partner, and her gay response to his endeavors to entertain her. Apparently she was quite unconscious that she had done anything to vex her hostess, and I am grateful to this day to Mrs. Lacy that she did not suffer her to guess it.

"I am impatient for my dance, and the musicians are tuning up," I said, waiting for her at the door of the supper room.

"I am afraid I must ask if you will sit it out or let me go. I am very tired. I was up early this morning, before five o'clock; then there was the journey and the children. It has seemed rather a long day!"

I agreed, and, with the utmost concern, heedless of

what eyes might be on me—as a matter of fact, a good many were now watching Hester's movements and asking who she was—I found her a comfortable seat in the lounge.

"I shall have to be going in about five minutes. Mrs. Lacy wants the children to be taken home. I hear Bertha has had seven ices. I hope no disaster will ensue."

"The Babe has the capacity of an ostrich, and his digestion," I assured her cheerfully, any frivolity serving as an excuse to detain her. "Of course, you are staying at Hill Rise over the Sunday?"

"Yes, we leave at nine o'clock on Monday morning, I believe. The boat train starts from Victoria at eleven."

I mentally resolved to see as much of her as possible in the interval, but the Fates were not going to be kind.

"I should so much like to be introduced to your sister," she said presently, with that little touch of unexpectedness which always charmed. "Carrie promised to take me to her, but apparently she has forgotten."

"I'll find her if you promise not to move away, or to let anybody else monopolize you. This is still my dance, you know."

She smiled and nodded, and I went off with the fixed determination to secure Jane as an ally. If only she would be persuaded to ask her to tea, even with her charges, which would certainly disarm all suspicion, at our house next day, what a chance would be mine!

I knew at the moment of meeting that these two would be friends, but it was not till after, until all the deeps were opened, that I knew how much they were to one another. Jane's eyes beamed on the governess from behind her eyeglasses, and her voice was saying kind things immediately. She had the uncommon faculty of being able to say the right thing at the right moment, and, what is even more uncommon, of never omitting to say it.

If all the unsaid kind things could be tabulated, how they would weigh against the hidden heartache of the world!

Jane seldom criticized people, and never blamed them. I know now that she had a good deal to bear from two careless and quite self-centred men at the Helston Bank House, but she had never once complained. She bore all in silence. Why? Because she had an inner life, a life of the soul which not one in her circle suspected. I had no great powers of observation, at least they were then wholly untrained, but it was easy to see that these two understood one another at the very moment of meeting, and discovered a plane for their common interest.

I was reminded by a rueful glance at my program that a partner was waiting for me now, and I had to leave them. When I returned to the lounge in about ten minutes' time, I found to my chagrin that Hester had disappeared, taking Flo and the Babe with her. I felt an unreasoning resentment that such a woman should be so absolutely at Mrs. Lacy's beck and call, as if she had been a child. I

tried to hide it, but the rest of the evening was spoiled for me. It was now considerably past midnight, and, finding Jane again, I suggested that we should go home. She looked surprised.

"We can hardly do that, I think, Gilbert. Mrs. Lacy wouldn't like it, as she depends so much on you. Go and dance. I think we must both see it out."

We did, and walked home together about two o'clock in the morning. It was only a hundred yards, and the night was clear and fine, though rather cold.

"It was a nice party, wasn't it, Gilbert? Mrs. Lacy really makes an excellent hostess. She so obviously enjoys herself, and that makes things go. Haven't you enjoyed it? You seem dull."

"I liked it all right, only it was a bit long-drawn-out," I answered. "I was disappointed when I got back to the lounge to find Miss Lawrence gone. Did Mrs. Lacy come and order her off with that insufferable kid?"

"Oh, dear, no!" said Jane, looking at me in mild surprise. "It was Miss Lawrence's own suggestion. She was most frightfully tired, and looked it. She was up at some unearthly hour yesterday."

"I hope you liked her, Jane? She's different from the Helston crowd, don't you think? She struck quite a new note?"

"She is quite different. Of course, she is a lady; any one could see that, and her manners are perfect. I asked her to come to tea with me to-morrow if convenient to Mrs. Lacy. Father will be golfing

probably; you know he does n't like new people. She is to let me know in the morning."

I could have blessed her on the spot. I hid my eager delight, however, and when I reached my own room I turned the gas full on, and made a deliberate survey of myself, took a sort of inventory as it were, to discover whether I possessed anything to commend me to a woman's favor.

I was five feet eleven inches in height, and had the well-knit figure of the man who relieves sedentary employment by active outdoor life in his leisure. My face was regularly featured, and though the fashion for clean shaving had just come into vogue, my mouth and chin did not suffer thereby. I went to bed satisfied, on the whole, with my looks, which had hitherto not caused me much concern. I fell asleep after a considerable interval, with the pleasant prospect of seeing Hester Lawrence again on the morrow. But disappointment awaited me. I got down to breakfast a little late to find that Jane had received a note from Hester, delivered on the way to the station, where she and the children were to catch the nine-thirty train for London. It was Mrs. Lacy's wish that she should take them to the British Museum. I hid my disappointment as best I could, but all day pondered on the inconsiderateness displayed by Mrs. Lacy toward her guest. A man, even in the early stages of a love affair, has small sense of proportion, and takes an exaggerated view of everything connected with the object on which he has set his august affections.

He practically requires that the whole world shall fall down in worship with him.

I dropped in at Hill Rise that evening about nine, only to find that Hester had retired early to bed.

Again I had to hide my disappointment, and spend an hour discussing the ball and all its details. Its undoubted success had put Mrs. Lacy in a high good-humor, but she did not mention Hester's name.

Maud, however, twitted me with my attention to the governess, and I had some difficulty in keeping a perfectly unperturbed demeanor under the fire of her merciless sallies.

I was no churchgoer, but for several years had accustomed myself to play golf on Sunday mornings. I was half-minded to put in an unusual appearance at All Souls' next morning, and was only deterred by the fact that I had to play a foursome, and there was no means of letting my partners know that I was not coming.

I got back quite early in the afternoon, however, and at tea-time, to my joy, found Hester Lawrence in the Lacys' drawing room.

There were so many callers that it was some time before I could reach her side. The Lacys always had a substantial sit-down tea at five on Sunday afternoons, at which they were never without guests. It was really a big-hearted, hospitable house, and it was a genuine joy to both Mr. and Mrs. Lacy to see their table full. I can see now, however, that

the circle of their friends was really a narrow one; there is nothing people are more casual and ungrateful about than the hospitality of another man's house. Mr. Lacy was talking to Hester when I entered the room, and I casually wondered which of his pet themes he was airing for her benefit. I learned afterwards that he had been expatiating on his methods of business, with special reference to his quarterly sales, which had been an immense success, partly, I suppose, because they were then something of a novelty. I made my way to them after a time, and was received by Mr. Lacy with a friendly nod.

"Good day, Gilbert. Come to pay your Sunday respects as usual? Met Miss Lawrence on Friday night, I suppose? I fancy I saw you tripping the light fantastic together. Heard that Lord Wayneflete is really going to resign at last? We'll have to get busy in the opposition camp."

At that moment Hubert Parfitt was announced, and Mr. Lacy, looking much pleased, this being the first time a member of the other and more exclusive set had dropped in informally at his house on Sunday, hastened across the room to receive him. I seized my opportunity and dropped into his chair, determined that nothing short of an earthquake should tear me from it. I made no attempt, I am sure, to hide my joy, and I thought that Hester, in her short, trim skirt of navy-blue serge, and neat, well-cut white blouse, so trimly belted at the waist, looked even more charming than in her

evening finery. She was very pale, however, and looked tired.

"I am afraid they are working you very hard in England. I was horrified to hear that you had been banished to the British Museum yesterday after your late night."

"Oh, there was no banishment; it was a genuine pleasure, I assure you."

"But you must have been tired after Friday; indeed, you look tired now," I said with insistent solicitude.

"I am not at all tired to-day. I did not get up till nearly ten o'clock. Mrs. Lacy insisted on my having breakfast in bed. Carrie brought it to me. How kind everybody is, and how interesting England is! But a great many things surprise me. This Sunday calling, for instance. Somehow, I had got the impression, both from my father and the Miss Crosbys, that Sunday was very strictly kept in England."

"We are not so bad as we were in that respect. I have been on the golf links all the morning."

She looked puzzled and not quite sure.

"How strange! Don't you young men go to church any more, then, for I know Ned Lacy was not there to-day?"

"It has—it has gone a little out," I said rather awkwardly. "But I dare say it will come in again, and some of us don't have much leisure weekdays."

"In a bank?" she said, with a little uplift of her

brows. "Why, I thought the hours were very short, quite enviably so."

"We close the doors at four o'clock in Helston, but our work is by no means over then. Pray dismiss from your mind the idea that we have to do nothing but play ourselves. Our directors see that we earn our meagre screw."

As she did not say anything, I changed the subject.

"Of course, every house is not so busy as this on Sundays. Mr. and Mrs. Lacy are very hospitable people, and the children have carte blanche to ask all their friends. At my home, for instance, it is different. Not a soul crosses its threshold on Sundays, and hardly on week-days."

"I must say I should like a quiet Sunday. But haven't you any friends? Your sister must have, I am sure; she is so perfectly charming."

"I am glad you found her so, for she is really rather an aloof, retiring sort of person. She was very sorry you could not come to tea yesterday. Now there won't be a chance of your meeting again."

"I am afraid not. We go early to-morrow morning. Please tell her I hope I shall have the pleasure of seeing her again. Perhaps you may bring her to Brussels at some holiday time."

I was about to answer eagerly that I should certainly take the earliest opportunity of doing that, when Maud Lacy, with rather a wicked light in her eyes, came up to our end of the room.

"You are wanted downstairs for tea, Gilbert. Sorry there won't be room for you, Miss Lawrence.

Mother has sent the kids to the old schoolroom, as they refuse to wait."

"I'll go to them there," said Hester, not in the least put out, but smiling serenely as she walked away. I suppose I must have scowled, for Maud, in evident enjoyment, tapped my arm.

"Gone under to a governess, Gib, at your time of life! What a falling off is here!" she said mockingly. "I'm not sure whether I am going to forgive you for your rudeness and neglect last night. Do you know, you never wrote my name on your program once. How's that for auld lang syne?"

"I saw you engrossed with higher game, my dear," I answered, entering into her flippant mood. "You had nothing but scorn for yours truly."

"Oh, that happens to suit your book just at the moment. You men are adepts at slithering out of tight corners. Well, are you coming to tea or not? Parfitt has glued himself on to Carrie apparently for the rest of the evening. These demure little cats have a way of getting there, haven't they? But, seriously, Gibbie, what do you see in that cold, white-faced thing? She gives me the creeps with her superior airs, and I'm sure she hasn't any feelings. I've tried her, and I know."

I listened to this vulgar chatter with a sense of growing disgust. Already I was planning an Easter trip to Brussels, not, however, in company with Jane, but quite alone.

CHAPTER III

Most visitors to Brussels are acquainted with the beautiful pleasure ground of Terveuren, and know that it is an ideal spot for lovers. I was a happy, though as yet an unacknowledged, lover on Easter Sunday afternoon as I wandered its enchanted glades by Hester's side.

I arranged my little jaunt, and departed from England without any undue questioning on the part of my home people. On more than one former occasion I had gone abroad in company with Ned Lacy and other chums, so that there was nothing unusual about this special proceeding. Besides, as a family we had never made a habit of explaining or even of announcing our movements to one another. Three isolated units, we exercised the most complete freedom in all the actions of our lives. Fully aware of Jane's sympathetic appreciation of Miss Lawrence, I might have taken her into my confidence, but a lover in the early stages of his affairs is bound to be secretive. So long as his hopes are merely in the air, he is afraid lest their very existence should be suspected. Besides, the modesty and reticence which characterize all real and deep feeling seal his lips.

It is only the things that do not matter in a man's

life which he babbles of in the market-place. Each one, even the most superficial, has his secret and inviolable shrine. There was a certain element of uncertainty about my journey, as I had not the remotest information regarding Hester's holiday movements or designs, or even any assurance that I should find her at Brussels. All I knew was that the Lacy children were travelling to England under escort of the principals of the school. All else was hidden in the book of fate. Yet I set out, my heart soaring with buoyant hope.

I had thirty pounds to my account in the bank, a little nest-egg I had been collecting for a projected yachting trip on the Broads with a couple of chums in the summer. I had been a working unit for ten years, and thirty pounds represented my total efforts at saving! I had never cared for money for itself, but had spent it freely in all the channels open for the consumption of a young man's means.

Now I suddenly became interested in money from an entirely different standpoint. I even got to the length of wondering on what sum a man was justified in marrying, and how far a few pounds would go in the purchase of furniture. Our house belonged to the early Victorian era, and had quantities of solid heavy mahogany furniture, in which Jane took a sober pride and delight. The Lacys' new abode might with appropriateness have been christened The White House. All the decorations were white, and they had enamelled some of their mahogany

furniture to bring it up to date. It gave a certain light charm to the interior, of course, but it seemed to me that dignity had been sacrificed. I decided that I should like a house something like my father's, with perhaps the addition of the individual touch a woman of taste, such as I felt Hester must be, could impart to her surroundings.

I reached Brussels safely on the Thursday evening preceding Good Friday, but did not attempt to call at La Grenade next day, partly because I was feeling very seedy after a particularly bad crossing to Ostend, and partly because I was not sure how Hester would take a visit on the great penitential festival of the church. Somehow I felt sure she was religious, and I wished her to be so. A man, however indifferent and irreligious he may profess himself, likes to think that his own special woman, the one he would enshrine in his home, has a reverent mind. I should have been disappointed had I found Hester flippant about sacred things, as Maud Lacy so often was. Yet Maud was a regular churchgoer, and much addicted to early celebrations all the year round.

I had selected my hotel, the Quatre Saisons, carefully from the advertisement columns of the A.B.C. time-table, chiefly on account of the undeniable French flavor of its name. I had a fair knowledge of French, imparted by old Leblanc at the Grammar School, and I had a mind to air it. But I found at the Four Seasons merely a tribe of English-speaking waiters, and the house overflowing with my own countrymen and women. Happily, I did not meet a

soul I knew. I stayed in bed till lunch time next day, and in the afternoon, which was mild and showery, took a walk through the city, and finally retired toward the Royal Palace of Laecken, having ascertained that La Grenade was in close proximity to it. I discovered it without difficulty, a large white villa with green shutters, standing in a pleasant garden to which well-wrought iron gates gave admission. I did not linger in the vicinity, however, although I fervently prayed that I might have some luck next day, when I should present myself with such boldness as I could summon at the green door at the top of the terrace steps.

I dined that night at a small table with two London clerks who suggested a game of billiards. They had been disappointed by all the religious ceremonial in the city, and were anxious for the new day to dawn which would bring them some more exciting form of enjoyment. They would eagerly have joined forces with me on the morrow, but I told them I was fully engaged, having other friends in the city.

I rose at nine on Saturday morning, to find the sun gloriously shining, and all the gloom of the former day dispersed. I made a very careful toilet, and took quite ten minutes to decide on my necktie and socks, two items to which the well-dressed man invariably pays close attention. I remember I rather favored a red one, but put it aside merely because Maud Lacy had told me once that red was my color, and that I should be known as the knight of the red tie. Some subtle instinct assured me that Hester would be

unlikely to favor what Maud approved, so I chose a tie of soft amethyst, the true Easter color, which, when decorated by a neat single pearl, looked very well. I took my gloves, my hat, and my stick, and set out on my important mission, on the whole pleased with my appearance. I walked all the way out to Laecken, and arrived at the villa gates at a quarter to eleven o'clock. I proposed to excuse my early call by inviting Hester out to *déjeuner* with me. It was a lovely spring morning, the air soft and balmy, and in the Laecken woods the birds were making a perfect chorus of melody. A delicate mist of green seemed to tinge the tree-tops already, though Easter had fallen early. But then we had had a mild winter, and no frost to speak of since Christmas. At La Grenade a big almond tree in full bloom gave a delicious touch of color to the whole scheme. My heart was beating as I pushed open the gate and walked toward the terrace steps. Perhaps I should find it difficult to explain or excuse my visit.

If Hester were an ordinary girl, she would naturally take but one meaning out of it. In the Lacy circle, which had hitherto bounded my social horizon, the talk about unmarried men and girls was very frank and occasionally vulgar. To be seen talking to a girl even in the street was to lay oneself open to inevitable chaff. I am sure it is a bad foundation for the relation of the sexes; it creates a false feeling of restraint and self-consciousness which destroys both simplicity of manners and of heart. Also it

is a bar to that friendship which should be the foundation of lasting affection.

The moment I saw Hester that morning my horrible feeling of self-consciousness immediately and forever disappeared. Perhaps the circumstances of the moment contributed to this happy issue. She answered my knock herself, with a blue duster tied about her head and a long feather brush in her hand. She stared blankly for a moment at my apparition, standing hat in hand, then burst out laughing.

"Mr. Trent, of course! Do come in, won't you? How odd that you should come to-day! I kept on dawdling, not in the least anxious to begin the work I had planned out for this morning. I seemed to be expecting something to happen."

"Everything is right for me now that I have found you at home," I made answer, emboldened by the delightful naturalness of her greeting.

She opened the door quite wide then, and bade me enter, merely putting down her brush and unpinning her skirt, so that it fell down to her neat ankles and workman-like shoes. But she neither removed her apron nor her duster headdress, nor yet seemed in the least put out at being thus caught. She led me into a big, gaunt schoolroom with forms piled at one end, and long windows open to the garden at the back.

"When did you come to Brussels, and is your sister with you?" she asked as she drew a chair to the long table in the centre of the room and sat down, leaning her bare elbows on the boards. She

made a delicious picture, I thought, the blue duster giving a certain piquancy to her charming face. All my feelings on that incomparable morning rush back upon me in a vivid and astonishing flood.

"I arrived yesterday, and my sister did not come with me. She has plunged into a universal maelstrom, and I believe at this moment may be your companion in the spring-cleaning distress. But may I ask whether in Brussels a charwoman's duties are incorporated with those of teacher of the English language?"

She laughed merrily, showing her even white teeth. Her mouth was rather wide, as was her bosom, two characteristics of all the best and most generous-hearted women I have known.

"Oh, don't run away with the idea that you have unearthed a new Cinderella! The Miss Crosbys left on Saturday for England. I'm turning out their sitting-room to-day. I always do it myself, and love it. They would simply loathe the idea of any vandal hands on their beloved possessions."

"How long will they stop away?"

"For two weeks, probably, but I am the sort of person who must get ahead of things for my own comfort. I happen to possess that doubtful blessing, an orderly mind."

"I am sure you have and are everything that is charming!" I blurted out. "But I'm going to ask you to chuck the orderly mind to-day, and come out with me."

She laughed again, as if in sheer delight.

"Chuck the orderly mind—but think of the chaos that would ensue!"

"Never mind. Let us take the risks. Go and get your hat, and come out in the sun."

"But why should I do that merely because you ask me?"

"Well, I'm a fellow-countryman in distress."

"What kind of distress?"

"I'm stranded in a foreign land."

"Why foreign, when there is no escape from checked trousers and the British accent?"

"Mine are not checked," I said with a downward glance at the garments in question. "But I can't repudiate the accent, I'm afraid."

"Where are you staying?"

"At the Hôtel Four Seasons."

"Which, I'm sure, simply swarms with compatriots. The Four Seasons is properly accredited to Cook."

I affected to regard myself ruefully.

"Do I look specially like a cheap tourist?" I asked dismally.

"You are absolved absolutely," she echoed gaily. "And why did you come quite alone to Brussels? Somebody spoke of you in Helston as the man of many friends. Why didn't you bring Ned Lacy along?"

"He is spending Easter in Paris with his fiancée's people," I answered bravely. "Besides, I didn't want him."

"If you have not been in Brussels before, why not

take a guide? It would be quite worth your while."

"Mademoiselle, that is why I am here. Won't you take pity on me, and come out? I have had nothing to eat worth speaking about since I dined last night. Take me somewhere for lunch."

She rose, and putting up her bare arms, took the pins from the blue duster and shook it out.

"Yes, I'll come. It's against all rule and precedent, but I think I want to play and not to work to-day. I won't keep you waiting long. I have just to give Babette and Mimi a few instructions, get my hat and coat, and off we go!" She nodded brightly and flitted away. No chaff, no hanging back, just a frank, natural acceptance of what promised to be a pleasant outing. I blessed the inspiration that had brought me to Brussels. I blessed it ten thousand times more before the close of that incomparable day.

She had been seven years in Brussels, and no guide could have been so delightfully equipped to show its beauties and its treasures.

But no favored pupil ever cared less about the information so generously heaped upon him than I. I gazed at masterpieces of art, and thought them inferior to the frank, smiling woman's face at my side. I inspected jewelled treasures, and thought them less to be desired than the lustre in her speaking eyes. In fact, when evening came, I was desperately in love.

In its essence that feeling was so different from anything else I had experienced where women were

concerned, something so much higher, and deeper, and finer, that I make no attempt to analyze or describe it.

We parted lingeringly, with the hope of meeting on the morrow.

We went next morning together to the service in the English church, and afterwards took the long tram ride to Terveuren, where we lunched and spent the afternoon in the woods. It was again an ideal spring day, and we were as happy as two children. She told me much about herself, her lonely orphaned life, and what she called her amazing good fortune in having met such kind, enduring friends as she possessed in the principals of the school. I had not seen them, but was prepared to love them for her sake.

How purely these simple memories come back, how utterly purged from self I was then, how much better a man than I had been in all my five-and-twenty years of life!

I bow before these memories as a man prostrates himself before a shrine. Most men have some such shrine, a Holy of holies for their soul's salvation. The pity is that some grossness of our nature bars our entrance to it at moments when we need it most.

We planned to go to Waterloo next day, and no train was good enough for the occasion. At ten o'clock I arrived at La Grenade with a carriage and pair to bear my beloved away. Of what use was money except to buy her pleasure and my own?

We had a most enchanting day, though I retain

the haziest recollection of the respective strategic positions of the combatants.

Hester, who had the field by heart, was at great pains to explain it all to me again and again, while I questioned her idiotically just for the pleasure of hearing her go over it all once more. It was inside the broken wall of Hougomont that she finally abandoned me as a hopeless case.

"You have no real thirst for information, and history does not appeal to you. I am tired. Let us give it all up."

We did, and henceforth talked about ourselves.

In the garden at La Grenade after dark that night I tried to bid her good-bye, and to leave her. But I could not. Out came blurtingly the irrevocable question.

"I can't go away," I said simply, as a boy might have done. "You must know why."

She had no answer ready, and even seemed to turn away while I blundered on.

"You must know why I came, and why I can't go," I cried hotly. "I love you. Will you be my wife?"

"It is very sudden, isn't it?" she asked tremulously. "What can we know of one another?"

"All that is necessary," I answered with all a lover's boldness. "Love takes no account of time or distance. And we have been together for thirty-six hours."

"To prepare us for a lifetime!" she answered. "Will you give me till to-morrow to think?"

"But I can't," I groaned, "for I have to leave at eight-fifty to-morrow morning."

"Wait another day, or let me write, or perhaps you could come again at Whitsun. We should both know our own minds better by then."

"I know mine for all time," I assured her feverishly. "And six weeks is eternity."

I laid my hand on her arm, and felt it tremble at my touch. And the next moment she was in my arms, and I felt her heart beat on mine.

She was mine from that moment, and the little fluttering sigh with which she sought to release herself was hardly a protest.

She was overcome by the sweetness of the moment, as I was, and we were happy beyond all power of written words to express.

I did not go by the eight-fifty next day. I wired to Helston saying I was unavoidably detained and would travel by the night mail. We had another long day at Terveuren, and we talked of all the coming glory as children might have done, without hesitation or fear. To me my boyhood and all that was best in it had come back. The mantle of the past six years, smirched with some of the grossness of young manhood, slipped from me like a garment for which I had no further use. I became pure and clean as a little child, meet for the heaven of her eyes.

The transparency of her soul was wonderful. She was one of those who are literally born pure in heart. And that quality never left her in all the years we

spent together; it set her apart from among all the men and women of our set. I knew myself unworthy of the love and trust of that heaven-born soul, but longed, as every man longs in that high hour, to be worthier.

We talked of the future, and I was all for a speedy marriage.

"Our means will be limited for a few years. But I 'm going to get rich for your sake, darling. I believe, without boasting, that I possess the money-making quality."

"Don't cultivate it," she cried hastily. "I have no fear of poverty. I have always been poor. So many rich people I have known have been neither happy nor useful. Let us be content to be poor."

"But my jewel must have her proper setting," I said fondly, as I touched the soft velvet of her cheek. She did not turn away from me.

"You liked her quite well in the plain setting. The other might not fit," she said whimsically. "I assure you all my tastes are simple."

"I should like to see you in a great house, moving graciously, a centre of light and influence."

"Oh, that would terrify me, and I should not be a centre of anything. I am really a very shy and simple creature. Why, on Saturday when you so surprised me I very nearly died."

"There was not a sign of it," I said unbelievingly. "It was I who was trembling on the brink. Tell me exactly what you felt when you saw me."

All the foolish questioning and answering, dear to

the hearts of lovers, were ours that day, and need not be here set down.

Hester came to see me off next evening at the station, and the tears rose in her kind eyes at the moment of farewell.

"To think that just four days ago I was a lone woman in Brussels and in the whole world, and now there is you! It is the most wonderful thing that has ever happened."

"It is, and most wonderful of all, it is never going to end!" I answered boldly.

A little wistfulness seemed for a moment to dim the glory of her face.

"Is it, never? And when will you tell Jane? I am sure I want Jane to know quickly. I think it will please her."

"I must have you all to myself for a few days. It is all too precious even to tell Jane yet."

"I have nobody to tell until the dear Miss Crosbys come back."

I felt an immediate jealousy of these inoffensive women, but I dared not voice it. A man's outlook differs so materially, and he finds it difficult to grasp the fact that he may reign supreme in a woman's heart, and that yet she may have room for other affections.

This petty jealousy is at the bottom of much of domestic dispeace, popularly supposed to be caused by "in-laws." I, in the first stages of selfish possession, could brook no rival, even the most inoffensive. Hester, smiling bravely into my

face, had no comprehension of my limited outlook.

The spring breeze was tossing her soft hair, which escaped under the brim of her shady hat; there was a little flush of eager happiness on her face. She had been very aloof at Terveuren yesterday, but now she clung to me as if afraid lest I should leave forever.

"It *is* all real, is n't it, Gilbert?"

"As real as I can make it, darling, till I have you to myself," I answered with all the passion of my soul.

"And I shan't wake up to-morrow to find I have dreamed it?"

"The beastly Channel will be between us, that is all."

"And I won't get a letter the day after to-morrow saying it was all a misunderstanding, and that you have changed your mind?"

"Good Heavens, Hester, do you think so meanly of me as that?"

A little sob came in her voice as she made answer.

"I am a little afraid, because you have known me such a little while, and I have heard that men do not prize what they easily win. Oh, the train is going! Good-bye, good-bye!"

I spent the night pacing the deck of the Channel boat, pondering on the mighty thing that had befallen me and her.

In how short a space of mind had my outlook, nay, my whole being changed!

I was lifted up to heights I had never dreamed of; I was no longer a mere bank cashier, but a potential

being about to wrest terrific bonuses from fate. No achievement was going to be impossible for the sake of her who had dropped from Heaven into my life.

I saw myself in the near future scaling giddy heights, becoming Bank Manager, Director, handler of huge financial schemes, all that my dear mate might have that to which she was entitled.

At the back of it all was the secret and holy desire to be worthier of her.

I was only young, but all the lighter passages of my life I would have blotted out for her sake. Away the light views of womanhood, the silly cackle of the sexes, the empty flirtations which desecrated the shrine of love. Under the clear night skies I consecrated my manhood anew and wholly to the woman I had won.

Whence comes the incredible weakness which renders such vows, so purely taken, so difficult to keep?

CHAPTER IV

I arrived at Helston at ten o'clock next morning, and walked straight into my father's room at the bank to apologize.

He regarded me keenly as I entered, his bushy gray brows elevated with a slightly cynical air.

"Found the delights of a foreign capital too alluring, boy?" he said, good-naturedly enough. "No, I don't mind your having another day, only it is more convenient if these little matters are arranged beforehand. The precedent is bad for the other boys. You look fit enough. Have you had a good time?"

"I have, but not the kind of time you are thinking of," I felt obliged to answer.

He merely nodded and dismissed me. In our business relations inside the bank my father never showed me the smallest favor. Sometimes I thought him needlessly punctilious on that score, but in matters relating to his business he never made any mistakes. He had the most perfectly balanced business mind I have ever encountered in my life.

But just then something jarred, and I went out with a distinct feeling of aversion, partly mental and partly physical, toward my father.

I had been breathing a rarer, purer air, and the man-of-the-world cynicism which took certain things for granted in a young man's life repelled me at the moment; I entered the house door which opened from the bank passage, and ran upstairs to deposit my portmanteau. I felt disappointed to learn that Jane had already gone out on her morning's shopping. As I came down, however, ready to address myself to the somewhat monotonous duties of my desk, I met her between the doors.

"Oh, there you are, Gilbert!" she said, with her quiet, pleasant smile. "I'm glad you've come back. Had a good time?"

"The best I've ever had."

"You look tired, I think, but these night journeys take it out of one. Well, I mustn't keep you now. See you at lunch time."

She nodded, and we separated. I to the somewhat irksome routine which, however, did not altogether forbid dreaming of pleasanter things.

I fear that I put in an indifferent morning's work.

At lunch they asked me a good many questions about Brussels, and I was able to give a most satisfactory account of myself.

"You seem to have walked *a la* guide book, Gibbie," said Jane, with a gentle touch of banter. "I suppose you fell in with some one who knew all about the sights and the best way of getting about."

"Yes, I did. I was fortunate in having the best guide the city possesses."

"Did you think of calling on Miss Lawrence? I suppose not, as your time was so short."

The foolish color dyed my face, and I was conscious at the moment of both feeling and looking ridiculous. I caught an amused and rather surprised twinkle in my father's eye.

"Of course he 's seen the lady, though I don't happen to know her name, Jane," he said with a chuckle. "Don't rub it in. Without doubt she's the *raison d'etre*."

Jane came to my rescue immediately, with the quick perception and real kindly feeling we never failed to find in her.

"Never mind him, Gib. You know father will have his little joke. The Miss Crosbys are at Hill Rise. They are quite charming women, so truly gentle and refined. Mr. and Mrs. Lacy are at Margate, and Maud is entertaining them alone."

"Are they still there?" I inquired, with an interest which must have appeared desperate.

"No; they left yesterday morning for the sea. I believe that they were are to spend two weeks at Bournemouth and one in London. They may come down to Helston for the last week-end to take Florrie and the Babe away."

My father never took more than a bite of bread and cheese and a glass of milk for his lunch, and presently he left us and retired to his den for a smoke.

Jane leaned her elbows on the table and looked across at me interestedly.

"I am so pleased you made time to call on Miss

Lawrence. I am sure she would be glad to see you. Is it a nice school, and is she really happy there?"

"She's perfectly happy. I spent every available moment with her, so I had ample means of judging."

Jane looked as if she did not know whether to smile or look grave.

"I suppose she was your guide, then?"

I nodded. I could see what was in her mind, that she would have liked some further explanation, but I could not part with my secret; yet I tried, through rather lamely, to throw a little dust in her eyes.

"Brussels was simply overrun with the worst type of English tourist; my hotel was swarming with them. I was glad to get out with some one who knew the city by heart, and could keep me out of their track. We must go there together, Jane, perhaps at Whitsuntide."

"I should like that. I should enjoy it very much. I shall keep you to it, Gibbie. I was asked to Hill Rise to tea last Sunday, to meet the Miss Crosbys. Maud was at home alone with them."

"Indeed!"

I am afraid I spoke in a lack-lustre tone. At that moment I felt myself so detached from the whole Lacy crowd that I did not want either to see or to hear about them. Yet I knew that it would be impossible even if it were desirable to cut myself off from them. They would not let me. I had been too long a part of their scheme of things.

A little later in the day, as I was returning after office hours from the dispatch of an important

business telegram at the General Post Office, I met Maud, very becomingly dressed, on her way to pay what she called a smart call. It was a very sunny afternoon, unusually warm for the season, and she carried a lilac sunshade, which harmonized with the brighter hue of her spring costume.

I raised my hat and would have passed on, for in my strange new mood I felt an odd shrinking from her; but she immediately began to cross the road in a slanting direction. Seeing this, I hastened to meet her.

"You were going to pass poor me!" she said, with her most coquettish air. "Now whatever have I done to offend your highness?"

I hastily explained that she had done nothing, but that I was still in business hours. Observing incredulity in her eyes, I hastily inquired how she was, and whether she had been away from Helston for Easter.

"That shows how your interest in the Lacys is waning," she observed coolly. "Time was when nothing about them was too trivial to engage your attention. I have been at home, dutifully running the show while my stern parents are enjoying their little selves at Margate. Now, where have *you* been?"

"Why, of course you must know I went to Brussels?"

"Jane told us that much on Sunday, when she honored us, or rather the Miss Crosbys, at Hill Rise; but why Brussels?"

Her cool, critical eyes never for a moment left my face, and it was not in the power or nature of man to preserve perfect composure under the fire of her questioning.

"Why anywhere, for the matter of that?" I asked lamely. "Is Ned home yet?"

"Ned is not home, nor father or mother. I am all alone in my glory, looking after the house and incidentally the honor of the family. I 'll expect you to-night as usual. Then we can have a pow-wow about things in general and Brussels in particular. I must be off to pay my call, and then I 'll try to catch old Sally Martin at tea, or I shall have to toil all up that hill again before I get any."

"You can come to us — come now," I said, grasping at anything which would distract Maud, and give me time to consider what I was to do that evening.

Not so many weeks ago a *tete-a-tete* evening with Maud Lacy would have been looked upon by me with composure, even with a kind of anticipation. She could be very fascinating when she liked, with an admixture of bonhomie and feminine charm which had before now half turned my head.

Although according to her own candid statement there had never been any serious matrimonial intent in her mind where I was concerned, I was a man and in a sense a lover. She liked to play occasionally on that string even yet, and up till now I had responded always with the feeling that with Maud flirtation was perfectly safe, because we had

the understanding that there could be nothing serious.

But I was now placed in a different situation altogether. My absolute loyalty belonged to the woman I loved, and was going to marry. I must readjust my relations with Maud, shear them of every lover-like quality; either we must become everyday, ordinary acquaintances, or have a quarrel over it.

The last idea was hateful to me, though I know now that to have spoken out plainly at that very moment would have been not only the right and manly thing to do, but the most politic for all our sakes.

"Come up after supper, or perhaps you would walk out along the Crailing Road to meet me, Gibbie. If you'd do that I'll leave at a fixed time."

I hastily said I had some letters to write, that I would have to stop at the bank to make up for having filched an extra day.

She did not seem to doubt this excuse, and merely answered, "Very well, I'll expect you at the Rise about nine."

She nodded brightly and passed on, apparently suspecting nothing and as friendly as ever. But she left me in a serious quandary.

I knew perfectly well that a *tete-a-tete* evening with Maud Lacy involved a certain degree of intimate talk, sometimes bordering on the lover-like, some sentiment, and a kiss or more at parting. We had never quite given up all this, and though Maud had always declared that she had other matrimonial

views, one never knows what is at the back of a woman's subtle mind.

I knew that she liked me; she had given me endless proofs of it, and hitherto it had pleased me that it was so, but now my soul revolted against her pretty coquettish air of proprietorship, her cool assumption that a *tete-a-tete* with her was a chance not to be missed. What was I to do? I grew hot and cold in one breath. I knew that I ought not to go, since all my tender words, my kisses, my loyalty of soul and body belonged now by right to Hester.

I returned to the office with but a sorry attention to give to the waiting duty. Fortunately it was not one to make any severe demand on the mental powers; its routine insensibly soothed me, and when I went upstairs to tea I felt much better. I found Jane alone. It was my father's invariable custom to walk down to the club immediately office hours were over. I don't suppose he took tea there, but some refreshment more suited to his tastes. Jane and I nearly always had tea together alone, and it was then we had most of our more intimate talk.

As I saw her kind face at the head of the table (already she was busy with her own tea, with a book propped up against the hot-water jug) I felt a sudden rush of gratitude and appreciation toward her. She was a delightful creature in a house, quiet, sensible, never curious, content, or apparently so, to take things as they came, the sort of woman who never sought or expected explanations, or vexed herself with any of the problems, imaginary or otherwise,

which torment the souls of women all the world over and make their lives hideous.

To accept is no bad axiom for a woman to start her adult life with, and yet is there in the whole gamut of experience one more difficult to adopt? I doubt it.

Jane smiled in her usual friendly fashion at me, and I drew my chair up nearer to her. At the same time I happened to notice the book she had laid down, and found it to be French—not a novel, but a volume dealing with literature and life.

"Can you read this, Jane?" I asked.

She blushed a little.

"Oh, yes, quite easily. You forget that last year I took a reading course in French from M. Leblanc. He is a splendid teacher. I hardly ever have to use a dictionary now, but then, of course, the best prose in every language is always simple."

It was an unusual remark from Jane's lips, and gave me an insight into her mind which surprised me.

"You're a rum card, Jane," I said quizzically. "Fancy your wedging French literature in between the baking and brewing."

"As, strictly speaking, I neither bake nor brew, it would not be to my credit unless I filled up the gaps with something useful. Have you had a good day at the bank, or has it all seemed flat, stale, and unprofitable?

"Pretty well," I said vaguely. "Give me strong tea, Jane, without milk or sugar. I've got something to tell you."

"Yes?"

Her bright glance did not waver, but there was a little tremor of expectancy in her pleasant voice.

She handed me the tea. I took a big gulp, then sat back in my chair and began to drum nervously with my fingers on the table. From where I sat I could see the reflection of my face in the mirror above the sideboard, and observed that it was ridiculously red. I felt as nervous and shy as any schoolboy.

"Shall I help you out, Gibbie?" she asked, in the tone she might have adopted toward a quite small and rather naughty brother on the point of confession. "You want to tell me about Miss Lawrence."

"Yes, I do. How did you manage to guess?"

She laughed softly.

"Guess! there was no guessing about it. It was all as clear to me as the heavens at noonday. I felt rather anxious all the time you were away, dear, and even prayed that all would go well."

"You prayed about that?" I said rather stupidly, thinking how intricate and unfathomable was the heart of woman. "But why?"

"Well, because I wanted you to win. Did you find her kind?"

"I did," I said, as I rose to my feet. "She's mine, Jane, and I'm at once the happiest and most anxious man in the world."

She rose quite suddenly, too, and kissed me, and the tears stood in her eyes.

"Dear Gilbert, I've never heard anything in my

life to make me so happy. I am glad, oh, I am glad!"

I kissed her back, then we sat down again and tried to recover ourselves and to talk things over rationally.

"I want to know why you are so glad about it, and why you should have had any anxiety," I asked. For all of a sudden Jane's opinion and outlook had become of interest to me in a way they had never interested me before.

"Shall I tell you, Gilbert, I wonder?"

"Why, of course. I'm asking, am I not?"

"Oh, yes, but we ask heaps of things in this life and never find any answer, at least not till long after, and then it doesn't matter, or at least not so much. Well, it was time you met Hester—quite time."

"Why?" I repeated, and never in my life had I waited with more anxiety for my sister's words.

"Do you really wish to know, Gibbie?" she asked, and her eyes as they met mine had something in them, a kind of mothering look which I had never seen before.

"Yes, of course."

"Well, you are twenty-eight years old, and it was time you became a man."

"So that is how you regard me, my dear. Pray how old are *you?*"

"That has nothing to do with it. We look to men to do the real work of the world, to carry on everything. When they disappoint us— But you are not going to disappoint us now."

"And you think this will, in fact, steady me,

Jane? That is what you're driving at, I think?"

"It will give you something to live and to work for. A good many years have been frittered away."

She eyed me a little anxiously, as if not sure how her words would be received.

"Remember, you laid yourself out for this, Gilbert. It is risky asking for a candid opinion from a truthful person, but honestly I'm very glad, dear, and I'm sure I shall love Hester very much."

I finished my tea in silence, not in the least angry or chagrined, only filled with an immense surprise.

How quietly had the woman of our house, the unobserved and unobtrusive, been weighing us all up. There was something uncanny about it. All at once my sister became a personality in my estimation, something to be reckoned with, an opinion worth considering.

"Shall you be engaged long?" she asked presently. "You, an engaged man! How surprised all the Helston folks will be! You have been a sort of universal lover so long."

"Oh, come, Jane, give us half a chance," I muttered, half laughing, half vexed. But she refused to take back her words.

"I absolve you from everything now that you are not going to marry Maud Lacy. I have been so afraid of that any time in the last five years."

"I did propose to her once in a kind of a way," I confessed. "But she refused me. She told me then quite frankly that when she married it would be a rich man, who would take her clean out of Helston.

"I wish that he would come along, then, before those children come home from Brussels," she said, with a good deal of fervor.

"You think her influence is not good for them?"

"Well, frankly, I don't. They are dear children, and very easily impressed. I wonder what Maud will say when she hears of your engagement. How soon will you tell her?"

I pondered half a moment.

"Well, I believe that I ought to tell her at once."

"I 'm glad to hear that, Gibbie, for it is what I think, too. She had a great many questions to ask on Sunday when I mentioned where you had gone for your Easter holiday, and I am sure she suspects something. It will not be necessary to say much."

"I don't intend to. I half promised to go up to Hill Rise this evening."

"She 's alone there, Gibbie," said Jane, and her tone was significant.

"I've seen her alone a good many times, my dear," I answered rather loftily. "I rather think I shall be able to keep my head."

"I don't doubt it, but I can't help thinking that you should leave your announcement until Mr. and Mrs. Lacy come back. Tell it to them as a family. It will be both easier and better. They return to-morrow."

My inner consciousness assured me that this was excellent advice and I fully intended to take it. But somehow, after all the excitement of the past days, the evening began to pall. I had so accustomed

myself to spending my evenings out of my father's house that at certain hours I felt myself almost a stranger in it. I had written my letter to Hester at odd times during the day, and soon after supper I left the house ostensibly for the purpose of posting it. It was a very fine night, and as I had been indoors most of the day I felt inclined for a walk. The Hill was the best walk in the town. Up there one got a whiff of purer and more bracing air.

Needless to say, my walk ended at the white gate of Hill Rise.

Old habits are difficult to break, and I had got to feel at home under the Lacys' roof. The servants knew me so well that they were never on ceremony with me, and did not even trouble to announce me.

"Has Miss Maud come back from Crailing, Alice?" I asked the housemaid.

"Oh, she didn't go, sir. She's in the little sitting room upstairs, and expecting you, I think. You were to go right up."

She did not smile as she said the words, nor had they anything significant about them. I nodded and made my way up the white staircase, with its bright, warm, crimson carpet and heavy brass rods, which were Maud's taste. I think I mentioned before that she had a predilection for vivid colors.

I knocked lightly at the little sitting room door, and then walked in as a privileged visitor might. It was just nine, and the quick darkness had fallen. The room was lighted by a standard lamp with an amber-colored shade, and it was standing at the

back of the couch, on which Maud was half reclining with a book. She had on a sort of yellow rest-gown, rather loose and certainly becoming. She nodded brightly to me across the narrow space.

"So you have managed to come. I thought perhaps you were too tired, and had gone to bed. I didn't go to Crailing after all. An hour of Miss Sally Martin just about finished me. The two curates from St. Luke's were there. Where will you sit, Gibbie? You 'll find cigarettes in the cedar-wood box, and please may I have one without shocking you?"

I handed her the box, and when she had helped herself, drew in a chair, taking care to place a little table between us. I knew Maud Lacy's moods pretty well by this time, and I made a fairly good guess at her present one. Before I had been five minutes in the room, I regretted that I had not taken Jane's advice.

"I'm so glad to have this little pow-wow to-night, old boy, all on our 'ownyo,' " she said presently as she puffed the smoke from her red lips, and then held her cigarette aloft a little, so that the lace fell away from her rather pretty arm. "You'll be rather surprised to hear that I felt most awfully down on my luck when I heard you had gone to Brussels."

"But why? You 've never felt like that when I 've taken other holidays."

"No, because I always knew pretty well where you were, and what you were doing. What *did* take you to Brussels, Gibbie?"

Here was a poser. I put down the cigarette I had already lit, and, taking out my little paper-case, began to roll one for myself. It served as an occupation for my hands, and I had to keep my eyes on the operation, too.

"Well, I'd never been, you know," I said lamely.

"Tell that to the marines. Look me in the face, Gilbert Trent."

I was obliged to raise my head at that, and her eyes met mine in a very searching stare.

"I believe you went to Brussels to see that governess person. Did you, now?"

"What makes you ask such a question?" I inquired, a little nettled by her sharp catechism.

"Well, quite suddenly you disappear without saying anything to a living soul. You'll admit it wasn't like you. You could have knocked me down with a feather when I heard from the bank porter that you had gone to Brussels."

"And how the devil did he know? He must have been poking his nose where it wasn't wanted."

Maud put down her cigarette and leaned forward half across the table.

"You can't look me in the face, Gib, and say you didn't see that woman."

"No, I can't," I answered steadily, "for I did see her."

"And you can't deny that you went to Brussels for that purpose, and no other."

"No, I can't deny it," I answered calmly. "I admit that it was so."

"Well, and now may I ask how little, or how much, it all means?"

I did not like her voice. It had lost its half-caressing, half-bantering note, and become like the edge of a saw. It helped to steady me, for I was under no sort of obligation or bond to Maud Lacy, though we had done a good bit of philandering. I had once asked her to marry me, and she had refused. I was, therefore, honorably absolved from further responsibility. It had not occurred to me that at the back of her heart she might care, or that she wanted to keep me as a string to her bow lest all others should fail. I don't think I was ever a vain man, at least I had never laid any flattering unction to my soul concerning Maud, in the last three years.

"I suppose I had better tell you," I said, and instinctively rose to my feet. "I'm engaged to Hester Lawrence."

She had cleverly forced my hand. Little more than twenty-four hours ago I had parted with Hester, determined to keep our sweet secret for a time, and lo, it was scattered to the four winds of Heaven!

No confidence would be respected in the Lacy household, I knew. Directly a private matter became their property, it went the round of their common acquaintances, and was discussed in all its bearings by all sorts and conditions. I saw myself and Hester under the crushing review, and my uppermost feeling at the moment was chagrin at the prospect.

But presently I became aware of Maud's curious stillness.

She had turned her head away, and when I made a movement to disturb her, and she looked round, I saw that she was crying.

I may as well say frankly that I could never stand a woman's tears.

I had not encountered many in my time, and therefore they had then lost none of their potency to move me.

Besides, I knew that Maud was not a crying woman. I had never in my recollection seen her moved to tears before, and the sight terrified me.

The thought that I had caused them filled me with a strange remorse. I never felt so desperate or so miserable in my life.

A strong, fine woman, who has always carried her head high and laughed with the best of them, suddenly reduced to tears, is a disquieting spectacle for the man who has caused them.

It makes him question his own actions, recall his words, fiercely examine himself. If he has acumen enough to absolve himself from blame, then my advice to him is to quit; to quit at once. That is what I ought to have done, only I did not. I stood like a great schoolboy convicted of a fault, and tried to explain.

Explanations are fatal in almost every relation of life. There are very few crises which cannot be tided over by silence.

"Don't cry, Maud," I said dismally and crudely.

"I can't bear to see you crying. It can't be a matter of any consequence to you really. You have always assured me that you didn't care and that you expected to marry some day."

She wiped her eyes and looked at me with much sweetness of expression.

I have never been able to decide how much or how little genuine feeling was at the bottom of this little scene. Tears became Maud Lacy, undoubtedly. They gave a certain softness, generally lacking, to her personality; she seemed more womanly than I had ever seen her before, and, consequently, more beautiful. She made a striking picture, of which I was fully conscious at the moment.

"Have I said so, Gibbie?" she asked gently. "It just shows what a fool a woman can be and how much nonsense it is possible to talk. I don't suppose, really, that I ever expected the deluge would come. Sit down here, and tell me all about it."

Her tone was so reasonable and kind, that, though my better judgment warned me to fly, I obeyed her with exemplary meekness. I drew in a stool to the side of the couch, and sat down, and she reached out her plump, well-cared-for white hand and patted mine.

"Dear Gib, if you're going to be happy, your pal won't mind. It's that I'm most anxious about. Tell me every single, solitary thing, how it happened and all——"

Here was a poser. Tell her every solitary thing about these incomparable days, regarding which I was still shy to reticence with myself!

"Oh, it just happened in the usual way," I answered awkwardly. "When I saw her that night at the ball I knew I should want to see her again. Of course, I didn't expect it would come off in such a hurry."

"It does sound a bit rapid," she said, with a little flash of the eye. "But, poor thing, I dare say she would feel anxious to bring it off before the Channel rolled between you again. Men are such queer cattle, and she can't have many strings to her bow."

This remark was typically Lacyan, but, applied to Hester Lawrence, it jarred upon me horribly. "That wasn't it at all. I was the rapid one. I simply refused to go without some sort of promise."

"Was that it *really?*" she asked, with a slight uplift of her heavy black brow. "Why wasums in such a hurry then?" she added presently, patting my hand again. "It isn't so easy getting out of the cage after you're once in, Gibbie."

I had no answer to that. I moved uneasily on my seat, writhing in spirit but too idiotically weak to cut myself free. How many men have found themselves in a like position, and while cursing themselves, succumbed to the woman's stronger will! Maud Lacy willed that I should stop there by her side until she was done with me. She did not propose that all these days of friendship, philandering, call it what you will, should come to an end in a flash of time, and without an effort on her part to preserve her jurisdiction over my life.

"Look here, Gibbie, we 'd better have this thing

out," she said in her friendliest tone. "Of course, you know that my people expect us to marry some day."

I started. I had certainly not thought so. In all my intimate talk with the various members of the family, such a thing had never been mooted. Their allusions to Maud and me had never gone beyond the stage of chaff.

But Maud spoke so seriously that I was for the moment impressed.

"I don't see how they can. I asked you, Maud, and you refused. That made an end. If you'll cast your memory back you'll remember that we agreed the little episode should not be allowed to alter anything, that if possible we should be better pals than ever."

"Well, and have n't we?"

"I suppose so. I 'm not complaining. And I expected you to take this differently."

I said so, but in my inmost soul I knew that I had not expected it.

I was only paying now for the incredible folly of these years in which I had drifted, allowing the chains to be bound upon me.

"I am not complaining either," she answered coolly. "I only wondered whether it would be the end of everything between us."

"Why should it?" I asked lamely. "A man's marriage need not cut him off from all his old friends."

"It need not, but it does very often, in fact almost

always. But I hope you won't allow her to take you away from Hill Rise altogether."

"No, of course not. We shall all be as friendly as ever," I observed fatuously. "Why not?"

"I have my doubts," she said, shaking her head. Suddenly she touched my hand once more and fixed me with her intense eyes. "Say, Gibbie, I haven't got over the wonder of it yet, nor the mystery. Whatever did you see in her? She has no life? I thought you liked a woman to be a bit of real flesh and blood. I wish you'd explain it to me."

How could I? My very soul shrank at the thought.

"No man can ever explain exactly why he wants to marry any woman. You surely know that. It just comes over him that he does want to marry her, and if she'll have him, it comes off."

"Is that how you felt about me?" she asked wickedly.

"That's ancient history," I answered lightly. "I think I'll be getting back."

"Oh, not yet. It's only ten o'clock. Sit down. I haven't heard half I want to hear. Will you be married soon, and where will you take a house? Why, I have a thousand questions to ask. Does anybody know except me?"

"Only Jane."

"Jane approves probably?"

"She does, but thinks, I can see, that I am hardly good enough."

"Good enough for a governess!" quoth Maud with scorn. "I shall just like to hear what the mater

says. My, won't she stare when I tell her to-morrow!"

"I don't particularly want it talked all over Helston just yet, Maud," I said desperately.

"Oh, I shall not hawk your secret about, but you'll own that the mater must be told. She'll take it as a personal slight if you don't tell her yourself. They'll be down by the seven o'clock train to-morrow evening. If you promise to come in after supper and own up, I won't say a word."

But that I could not promise, and I made another effort to get away.

"You're determined to go," she said pettishly. "I see the beginning of the end, Gibbie. Well, I'm sure I don't care."

She spoke a little recklessly and her eyes were gleaming. She rose from the sofa, and stood up, and without any warning suddenly put her two hands on my shoulders.

"So it's good-bye to the old sweet camaraderie, Gibbie, oh, dear, oh, dear! I didn't think it possible I could have minded! What a fool I've been!"

The next moment her arms were round my neck, and she had kissed me, or I had kissed her. At this distance I could not say what actually happened. But a minute to two later I was outside the house, all my feelings in a turmoil, and savage with myself. Before me I saw the pure smile of Hester's face, her clear eyes looking with love and trust into mine. How hateful was all this, and how could I escape from it forever?

One thing that ghastly interview had revealed to me: the absolute necessity of getting away from Helston before my marriage.

I could not picture myself in a home that would have a chance of happiness or peace in the same place with Maud Lacy. She might be friendly enough with my wife, might in fact weary her with too much intimacy. And she would never give up her friendship for me.

As I strode savagely down the hill, the title of a ridiculous debate that had taken place some years before in the Shire Hall under the auspices of the local literary society recurred to my mind: *Can Men and Women be Friends according to Plato?*

I had taken part in that foolish argument, taking the affirmative side. The futile sophistries I made use of rose up to mock at me now. All the Lacys had been on my side, and at their house, afterwards, Maud and I congratulated ourselves on being the concrete example of my contention. But the entry of the other man, or the other woman, is the supreme test of all such friendships. Ours had simply broken down, like most of them, under it.

Eleven was ringing from the square tower of the parish church as I crossed the High Street and let myself in with my latchkey. The house was perfectly still, as usual at such an hour, when Jane would have retired to her room, and my father, if he had returned from the club, would be smoking and reading in his own den. He was an insatiable reader of novels. They never seemed to pall on

his jaded palate, and he retained an extraordinarily vivid recollection of the books he had read, even the trivial ones. I have often thought what a strange storehouse his mind must have been.

The hall light was out, too, my father being strict in the practice of the small economies which make life hideous; but I noticed a gleam under his door, and entered it without further parley.

I did not often disturb his privacy so late, generally going straight up to bed when I returned from the Lacys' house, but he took it very well.

"Not gone to bed yet, Gib? I thought you'd be tired after all the excitement of the last twenty-four hours. Have a whisky?"

"Thanks. I don't mind if I do," I said gratefully, as I crossed the narrow floor space to the knee-hole writing-desk on which the bottle stood. In his private room my father did not achieve a decanter. In his estimation whisky lost something by being transferred from its native bottle. I looked at him with sudden interest and something of appeal as I sat down with the glass in my hand. It occurred to me that as he had lived so much longer in the world he must necessarily be much wiser than I. At the moment I felt foolishly young, crude, wholly at a loss. In a sense, if not the arbiter of my destiny, at least he could give me immense help.

"Dad," I said in rather a shamefaced way, "I'm in a kind of a hole."

I don't know what tempted me to these words, for in ordinary circumstances my father was the

last man upon whom one would force a confidence. And most certainly he never invited one. But there it was.

He put his book face downwards on his knee, and looked at me over his eyeglass with a good deal of kindliness. I see him yet, the handsome wreck of a man, and that night I understood part of the charm which had enabled him to keep superiors and equals and inferiors loyal and devoted to him through a long and not very dignified life. It was something within, some spark of the divine fire which is in every man, but which comes to the full flame in very few.

"I thought there might be something behind; well, out with it, my boy. If I can help you I will."

"It isn't any kind of disgraceful scrape," I blurted out. "Only I'm engaged to be married."

"To Maud Lacy, I suppose?" he said, and his tone was exceeding dry.

He could not have said anything to nonplus me more. It showed what the world expected, and for the moment appeared to justify Maud's claim.

"It isn't Maud Lacy. Why do you speak as if she were the only woman in the world?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I may be excused, perhaps, for thinking she was where you are concerned. You've glued yourself pretty tightly to them for the last five or six years. Personally, I am glad to hear it, if you've got away. Who is the lady?"

I explained, and, as was natural, waxed a little

eloquent regarding her. To my surprise, he listened with a complete gravity and attention, not smiling once. "Well, where is the hole?" he asked quietly. "Unless you're under any bond to Miss Lacy."

I explained my position there as best I could, and I saw that he fully understood. When I had finished, he took out his cigar and held it smoulderingly between his fingers.

"You've spoken with great frankness, Gilbert, and I pay you the compliment of accepting your statement as it stands. I know you're telling me the truth. I haven't the honor of an intimate acquaintance with the lady, but of this I'm perfectly sure, that she'll make trouble if she can. I know the type."

"But she seemed pleased enough at the end, only —only it would be natural for Hester to resent her assumption of control over my actions, her extraordinary interest."

"It would, and the better the woman the more she feels that particular kind of interference from the outside. The first thing a man has got to consider in his relations with women, is that they don't come under any category he has been previously acquainted with. He can't tabulate them or assume with the smallest certainty how they will behave in any given circumstances. Each woman is a law to herself. It is part of the charm of the sex. Do you get that fixed in your mind, boy?"

"Yes, I suppose it's true."

"Before you can expect to be happy or to give your wife the peace of mind she is entitled to, you must get

your feet clear. You can't settle in Helston, Gib."

I felt my face glow. They were the words I most desired to hear, yet I had not dared to hint at it, because it was tacitly understood that when my father retired at the age limit, in a year from then, I should step into his place. In view of his exceptional services to the bank, and perhaps in consideration of my own humbler qualities, his directors had as good as promised this. I knew that it was a chance of quick promotion which would probably never come to me again. But at that moment I was willing to sacrifice it, and a few other things, to clear the way.

"That would certainly simplify everything; but what about this place?"

"Somebody else will have to get it, that's all. I don't want to blame you, Gib, but you've hurt yourself by your association with the Lacys. That kind of intimacy brings its own punishment as well as its rewards. It destroys the privacy of a man's soul. How much of your real self has been hidden from these people? Is there a single door you have closed against them?"

"Not one, until now."

"Well, you can't expect to get off scot-free, and your wife is bound to suffer in some slight degree, too. But I don't want to rub it in. When do you propose to get married?"

"Some time in the autumn, I thought, if my financial position justified it. I'll have to go into things a bit."

"I take it you haven't saved much, living as you've been doing?"

"I haven't saved anything, or at least very little."

"And do you propose to furnish your house on the hire system, or what?"

"I can scrape together something between now and autumn," I answered lamely.

"Humph," said my father, more to himself than to me.

I could see that he pondered things in his mind, and I was content to wait for their maturing. Presently he spoke in rather slow, measured tones.

"There's a hundred and fifty to your credit somewhere, Gib. It is yours by right. When you were born, your mother started a fund for you, had some idea of sending you to Oxford, I believe. My ambitions didn't run to Oxford for you. I thought there was something in banking good enough for you, after it had served me. But I kept on adding to the money; mere sentimental idea, I suppose, but there you are. She did the same for Jane, arguing that perhaps she wouldn't marry, and would require it, or that if she did marry she might require it more. Your mother thought a good deal about things most women despise. I have never met anybody quite like her. She left her mark wherever she went."

I did not ask what kind of a mark. I was awed into silence. For this was absolutely the first time my father had mentioned my mother's name to me since I was a little chap, and there was that in his

tone which indicated that he had unlocked the door of the inner shrine.

It startled me even to imagine that he had a shrine. Had any one suggested it to me a couple of hours earlier in the evening I should have smiled at their guilelessness. One more proof of how little we know of those with whom we live.

"What sort of a woman is this you have engaged yourself to? I suppose that she is the very antithesis of Maud Lacy?"

"You have said it," I answered quickly enough. "They belong to different spheres. I had almost said hemispheres."

"We don't marry the women we philander with. I was like that with your mother, though I had a round dozen of love affairs before I married her. I suppose that's what took you to Brussels?"

"Yes."

"What is she doing there?"

"Earning her living as an English governess. She's in the school where the two Lacy girls are being educated. She brought them over for the ball; that's where I met her."

"I see! Another reason why it would be advisable for you to settle at some distance from Helston. I'll go up to Threadneedle Street on Thursday and hear what they have to say."

My face flushed, for I knew what that meant. My father was, for the first time in his life, concerning himself actively in my affairs. But it was difficult for me to thank him. As a family we had carried our

reticence toward one another to lengths unthinkable and absurd.

"They're opening countless branches in the new suburbs. I don't think there will be any difficulty in getting one for you after I've talked to 'em for a bit. They'll take my word if I say you're capable. Twenty-nine, aren't you?"

"I shall be in October."

"Young enough for a manager, but it's the day of the young man, and now you've got something to settle you, you ought to do well enough. Good night."

He said the word with extraordinary abruptness, almost as if he felt a secret shame over his readiness to enter into my interests and help them forward.

"Good night, sir. It's most awfully good of you. I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything. You've been a good enough son to me. At least, you've never made me ashamed of you. And I'm glad you're going to marry. I haven't said anything, but I was wondering how much longer this Lacy business was going to last. I've seen you deteriorating under it, but it wasn't my business to interfere."

"On the contrary, it was your business, sir, and I wish you had," I said bluntly.

He looked at me oddly over the brim of the eyeglass he had already adjusted for the purpose of resuming his reading.

"Perhaps you're right, perhaps not. I've never posed as a model father. Fact is, Gilbert, no watch

can keep time when the mainspring's broken. That was what happened to me. Good night."

I went out of the room in no doubt but that my dismissal was final this time. But the words pursued me. "The mainspring broken! That was what happened to me." It sums up as well as any other words in the English tongue the whole tragedy of the widower's heart and life.

CHAPTER V

Six weeks is an interminable time to a newly engaged man, who has no opportunity of seeing his beloved in the interval. It was not surprising that I wanted to divide the eternity between Easter and Whitsuntide by a week-end at Brussels. But I could not get away. I had so much to say to Hester, and even the best of letters can never say all. After I became engaged my relations with the Lacys suffered some hurt. I had to stand so much merciless chaff and minute questioning at Hill Rise, that I had slackened off going to their house. This displeased Mrs. Lacy not a little, and one day when we met in the street she reproachfully taxed me with it.

"I would never have believed it of you, Gilbert, to shunt old friends the moment a new face comes along! I assure you we are all feeling it."

I hastened to assure her that I had no such intention, but that I had felt they were a little hard on me.

"I don't know what you call hard," she said, fixing me with her handsome eyes, which were very like Maud's, only kinder. "Why should you escape the common lot? I've heard you give as good as you get many a time. Why should we wrap you in cotton wool? Besides, if she isn't worth standing

a bit of chaff for she isn't worth having. When's it to come off?"

Her tone instantly became kinder, because there was no real guile or malice in her heart. If Maud had been like her mother in this respect my troubles would have ended there; need, perhaps, never have begun.

"Nothing is definitely settled, and it may not be this year, Mrs. Lacy."

"Oh, we all thought you were going to be in a desperate hurry. And where are you going to live? They are building some new small houses on the Hill, quite pretty and up-to-date. It would be very nice if you came up there, Gilbert, then we shouldn't feel as if we had quite lost you. I could help her, too, for it stands to reason she can't know much, if anything, about housekeeping. And after Jane's splendid management you won't like bad cooking or anything sloppy."

Few men trouble themselves about the housewifely capabilities of the woman they are going to marry. I certainly had not had any qualms regarding Hester's.

"There isn't anything settled," I said evasively. "It is even on the cards that I may not stop in Helston. My father thinks I should leave it."

"But why? I thought it was understood that you should step into his shoes soon? It's a very good billet as banks go, but, of course, it isn't like business. If you had been my son, I never should have allowed you to stand behind a bank counter. It's a genteel, easy occupation, but there isn't a red cent in it."

"I may go to a London branch," I said recklessly. "Then one has chances. In a place like Helston, one is apt to get into a groove."

"So you are determined to cut yourself off," she said, returning to her somewhat reproachful tone. "Well, well, I suppose it is the way of the world, but I expected different things from you. I'm anxious about Maud, Gibbie. She's gone off her food, and is so cross and irritable, there's no living with her. I think we must send her to the sea for a bit, but she refuses to budge."

I suppose I must have looked as uncomfortable as I felt, and imagined all sorts of subtle meanings hidden under these apparently innocent words. But Mrs. Lacy was incapable of innuendo. Her outstanding characteristic was to speak her mind, and she proceeded to do it without further parley.

"I don't mind telling you that Bob and I would have been uncommonly pleased had you and Maud made a match of it. You seem to understand her, and there's no doubt whatever that she's fond of you."

I didn't know where to look. It was the first time she had so pointedly alluded to the subject, and I had not the remotest idea that her mind had ever harbored it. One of the chief charms of the Lacys' house was the freedom in it for a young man. One never had the feeling that he was being angled for, or regarded as a possible suitor. But evidently the lure had been there all the same.

"I proposed to Maud once, Mrs. Lacy, a good

many years ago, and she refused me," I said bluntly, and hating myself desperately for taking the line of least resistance. "She told me, then, she was aiming at something higher than a bank manager, and that though she liked me very well, she had not the smallest intention of marrying me."

She looked the picture of surprise.

"Well, I never! Why, who would ever have thought it, Gilbert? I must tell Bob. How close Maud can be about her own affairs! But you must n't think she has said anything nasty about your engagement. Honor bright, she has n't. But all the same I can't help thinking that she is feeling it. Queer, isn't it, how we can bring up children and know so little about them? I've never professed to understand Maud. Now with Carrie everything is plain sailing. She simply opens her mouth, and you know where she is and where you are. She's more like me than any of them, don't you think?"

"Carrie is delightful," I hastened to say with a warmth which made her mother smile.

"Men are beginning to find it out, evidently, and I don't quite understand it, for she is n't half so pretty as Maud, and she laughs at them all. But it's such a kindly laugh, and she never makes them feel small or tries to be smart at their expense as Maud does. I should n't be at all surprised to see Carrie sailing in ahead of them all with flying colors. Don't look so glum, Gilbert! I'm not down on you, only I do wish we could keep everybody quite young—it's so much easier. A house full of little children all tumbling

over one another, that's my idea of happiness. When they grow up it's very different." There was real pathos in her words, and I saw that her big motherly heart was somehow sore.

"Dear Mrs. Lacy, I'll never, never forget what you've been to me," I said, and never had I spoken with more fervor or more truth.

To my surprise, two bright drops immediately started in her eyes, and we were in the middle of the High Street, too, in the full noonday!

"I know, and I like you quite as much as if you were my own; that's why I can't get used to the idea of another woman getting you, I suppose. I felt just the same about Ned, but I'll get over it. I say, Gibbie," she said suddenly, and I thought a subtle change came over her expression, "do you notice anything about me different just lately?"

"How do you mean?" I asked in quick concern.

"Do you think I look as well as usual?"

I regarded her with quick scrutiny. "You are thinner, much thinner, and last night I thought you looked a little wan just before I left, but I set it down to the color of the lamp shades."

"It wasn't the lamp shades. I'm *not* very well, Gibbie. I haven't been for a long time. But don't say a word to them at home. Ours is not the kind of house a person can be comfortably ill in. I'm keeping about as long as I can, and it would worry Bob so dreadfully. So don't say a word; but I like to think I can speak to you whatever is in my mind."

I felt a sudden revulsion. All my old love and

fealty to this dear woman who had mothered me through all my desolate boyhood rushed upon me like a flood. I drew her into the shadow of the old gateway of St. Anselm's, and spoke to her seriously.

"I don't like what you tell me. I simply can't have it. Have you seen anybody? Do you suffer pain? Heavens, you can't be ill? We simply won't have it."

"I haven't seen anybody, and I'm not going to. I hate doctors. I won't have them poking about me, and I don't believe there is anything really the matter with me. Lots of women get seedy about my time of life. Don't bother, Gibbie. I feel better already. It is good to have somebody like you to tell things to."

"You'll promise to take care of yourself," I said anxiously. "You do too much for other people. You want to rest a lot more. Let some of them take over the housekeeping and run the show at Hill Rise."

She shook her head.

"Ah, I won't do that, Gibbie. When a woman gives up her own show she's done. I'll hang on as long as I can. There isn't anything the matter with me, really—advancing age, that's all. Look here, Gibbie, would you like me to invite Miss Lawrence for Whitsun? I'd love to do it. She could come over with Flo and the Babe, though they are not supposed to have Whitsun. A week-end wouldn't hurt them, however. Shall I write?"

"Thank you very much, thank you ever so much, but I rather think Jane and I are going to Brussels."

"I see. How pleased Jane is about it all! It shines all over her face. You never know what these quiet ones are thinking and feeling. Well, good-bye, dear. It's done me good to talk to you. I hope you'll be happy and have a good time always—good-bye."

She nodded in her usual friendly fashion and moved away, always a dignified and handsome figure, the last thing in neatness and distinction in dress. I felt saddened somehow as I left her. A sort of feeling that play days were quite over crept over me. Life loomed ahead, Life spelled with a big L. Well, I was ready for it. I had put away childish things.

After all, Jane did not go to Brussels. I can't remember exactly why, but some difficulty seemed to arise, and I went alone.

I travelled by the night boat on the Friday, and was at the gates of La Grenade by eleven o'clock on Saturday morning.

Hester was waiting for me in the garden, frankly full of joy at seeing me again. It was not a very big garden, but there was plenty of shade and a snug little summerhouse we had all to ourselves for half an hour for our lovers' talk. As I held her dear face in my hands, and looked into her clear, trustful eyes, all my unworthiness rushed upon me afresh.

"Darling, it has seemed centuries," I cried. "And I can't believe I am actually here at your side again."

"It's quite real. I knew it was going to be this morning when I woke up with such a feeling of joy,"

she answered simply. "Oh, Gilbert, just think of the difference it has made in my life."

"Has it? What kind of difference?" I asked hungrily.

"Oh, it has changed everything, given a fresh beauty and joy to every common thing. But there is nothing common, Gilbert. Everything is lovely and good."

Could I have said the same, I wonder? I did not try.

"The dear Miss Crosbys have been so kind and considerate. They have sent the girls out with Mademoiselle for an excursion at Terveuren this morning, so we must not go to Terveuren to-day," she added with a shy, delightful smile, "though I am quite sure I want to, beyond everything."

"I dare say we can find somewhere else. How soon can you be ready, and do they understand that I must have you for the whole day?"

"You must ask them properly," she said shyly. "Now you have to come in and be introduced."

I confessed that I quailed at the prospect, but she only laughed merrily and began to lead the way into the house. From the front door it was but a step to the pretty sitting room, where I found the ladies in a state of evident expectancy. I am sure I looked like a silly sheep. I know I felt like one. But they quickly put me at my ease.

They were not at all what I expected, being much younger and more attractive looking than I had pictured them to be. Miss Madeline, the younger,

was decidedly pretty. They were truly gentlewomen, highly educated, refined, and, while entertaining very high ideals of life and conduct, there was nothing goody-goody about them.

Miss Crosby shook a very pretty finger at me after we had shaken hands. "You don't deserve to be received civilly, Mr. Trent. I hope you realize the magnitude of your offence."

"I don't, Miss Crosby. Pray enlighten me."

"You are going to rob La Grenade of its greatest treasure. We shall never be able to replace Hester; never in this world. My sister and I did not sleep at all the night after we knew."

I humbly acknowledged my offence, and while Hester went off to get ready, I sat down and began to find myself at home. It is possible that Eleanor Crosby, alive still, and not so very old, may read these words and recall that summer morning. Her sister, Miss Madeline, is dead, and the school long given up. I felt that while they were interested and in some degree critical, they were quite friendly. It was no greater ordeal than many a man has to go through when he comes for the first time under the review of his fiancée's people. I already knew that the Crosbys were the only people Hester had in the world, and that she loved them as if they were her actual kindred. Besides, they had been more than kind to her, which made me most anxious to leave a good impression on their minds, and to assure them regarding Hester's future.

"It is extraordinary how things happen in this

world, isn't it?" said Miss Eleanor in her bright but rather prim way. "I assure you we were most unwilling, weren't we, Madeline, to let dear Hester take the children to England for Mrs. Lacy's ball, and just see what has come out of it! You will have to be very good to Hester, Mr. Trent, but I hope you are not going to take her away from us for a long time."

"Just as soon as ever I can," I answered boldly. "That is what I have come about. I hope to be settled and to have a home to offer Hester in the autumn."

"In Helston?" asked Miss Crosby, while Miss Madeline, with very bright eyes and a pink flush on her cheek, sat forward eagerly to hear my response.

"No, in London, that is, the outskirts of London, where I hope we shall have the pleasure of receiving you very often."

Miss Madeline clasped her hands rapturously, and I understood from her silence that she was accustomed to leave speech on most affairs to her sister, to whom she looked up with the reverence a gentle nature feels for a strong one.

"Ah, that is kind, and we shall, of course, look forward to seeing Hester in her own home. I am, in a sense, her guardian, Mr. Trent. That explains my apparent fussiness. I should like to show you a letter Major Lawrence wrote to me in his last illness about Hester. It will explain the position better than anything else."

I felt rather surprised to hear her speak of Major Lawrence. I now heard for the first time of his

position in the army. Remember how rapidly my love affair had progressed, and how entirely we had been taken up with one another in the few weeks of our engagement! We had not descended to details. All that concerned me was that Hester had no people, and that therefore there was no possible chance of our being parted.

Before I could answer this speech Hester returned ready dressed for our walk, and we went out together, promising to come back in time for tea.

We wandered away from the gate, followed by the beaming looks of these two kind women, not caring at all where we went, but happy so long as we were together.

"Aren't they dears?" said Hester, with a little happy mist before her eyes as she waved to them. "Miss Madeline is quite excited. It is the first time there has been a love affair in La Grenade — why, I can't think. They are so charming. I am sure, if I were a man, I should wish to marry them both."

"Men are a little afraid of schoolmarms," I said with a smile.

"You didn't seem very much afraid of me," she answered quickly, which gave me the very opportunity I wanted. We were foolishly happy for a full hour, and I could not tell you at this date where she took me. I only know we came to a glade where there were trees, and that we sat down on a bank under them, and watched the sunlight filtering through the leaves, and there was nobody in the world, save only two. But by and by I saw

just a little shadow creep over my darling's face.

"Gilbert, I want to tell you something. I have had a letter from Miss Lacy."

I know I reddened, and her clear eyes, dwelling a little wistfully on my face, saw that flush, and perhaps misunderstood it.

"Yes," I said lamely. "And what had Miss Lacy to say?"

"A great deal. Would you like to see the letter, Gilbert? I have it here."

I wanted to see it beyond all telling, but I felt that I could not read it under the fire of Hester's eyes.

"Oh, no," I answered lightly. "I am sure she would not expect that you would show it to me. Maud Lacy and I are very old friends, Hester. We have simply known one another always, since we wore pinafores."

"I guessed as much, and she speaks of that, but—but, Gilbert, may I just ask you something, then we need never speak of it again?"

"Yes, of course; you have the right to ask me anything you like."

"There was nothing between you, was there? You know what I mean, don't you, dear? The happiness that has come to me is very dear, but I want to know whether it is *all* mine."

It was a full minute before words would come to me. I felt that she was waiting anxiously for my answer, and that much might depend upon it. Maud's letter would have been a guide, but, having declined its perusal, I was left wholly to my own resources.

"I will tell you the truth, Hester," I said in a low voice. "Once I thought I cared for Maud Lacy, and I asked her to marry me. She refused. That is all that has been between us."

It was another full minute before she spoke, and then I saw that something had gone from her, some inner brightness, which would perhaps never come again. I thought I understood it, and made my utmost endeavor to dispel that rising cloud.

"I think I know what you feel, my darling, just as I should feel, I know, if you were to tell me there had been another man in your life."

"But there never has been," she said quietly.

"That I could well believe, though where their eyes have been I don't know," I hastened to say with all a lover's fondness. "But with a man it is different. It is bound to be in the very nature of things. If he is made of flesh and blood at all, he can hardly escape having a few affairs before the real thing comes along."

The wistfulness did not leave her eyes; her expression indicated that she was pondering some fresh point of view, which did not altogether make for happiness. "I suppose that is true, but I can't help thinking it is a pity, Gilbert."

"That what is a pity?"

"If God ordains one man and woman for one another, and they could wait for their meeting, and think of no other, that would be perfect. Does it never happen, I wonder?"

I felt a pang as she put the question, and had

any one but Hester propounded it, I should have laughed aloud. I thought of Ned Lacy, of myself, of all the men I had known, and of how far short we all fell of such an ideal. Why, the swaggering schoolboy with his cheap cigarette and his affectation of manhood begins playing at love as soon as he knows how to spell the word.

"It may happen sometimes, but it is unusual," I said gravely. "But I do believe this, Hester, that most men keep the inner shrine inviolate till they meet the right woman. I never knew the meaning of love till I saw you. The moment I saw you I felt that life was changed in a hundred different directions, charged with new meaning and purpose. For the rest, it was but froth, gone with the first puff of wind, and leaving no trace behind."

They were fine-sounding, grandiloquent words, but I question if they convinced Hester. She vaguely smiled, pullin.. to pieces a tall foxglove that grew at her feet.

"Perhaps I have lived a very narrow life. Men do not enter much into the scheme of things at La Grenade, and women who live like that get their ideas from books, which, of course, hardly ever present life as a whole. When I was at Helston—"

She paused for half a minute, and her eyes persistently bent themselves on the ragged foxglove.

"When you were at Helston?" I repeated gently, eager yet partly dreading the next words.

"A good many things puzzled me. Mr. and Mrs. Lacy are very happy together, aren't they?"

"Happiest couple I know. They have all tastes in common, and their idea of a home is a place where people have to be happy."

"I have never met any one so truly kind as they both were, and I kept puzzling myself about the children. Not one of them seems to resemble their parents, and they are all so different. I hope it will not vex you, Gilbert, if I say that I liked Maud, your friend, the least of all."

I was not at all surprised. I would have been surprised, perhaps, had she said anything else.

"It is horrible to be speaking like this, but I do want to be quite true and frank about everything, Gilbert. If we live in Helston, shall I have to see a great deal of her?"

"We shall not live in Helston," I answered fervently; "and you will make your own friends. God forbid that I should thrust mine upon you."

"Oh, but that would be most unreasonable, and if you wish me to make a friend of Miss Lacy, I will try to do so. But something inside of me seems to shrink from her. It is the narrow life I have lived, I suppose. But she seems to expect that she will see a great deal of us. She even asks me to keep the door wide open, so that she may not lose her friend, who has been so much to her all these years."

I could have gnashed my teeth. Even then I was on the point of asking to see the letter, but once more I refrained. I guessed that its full perusal would probably madden me. But I hated Maud at the moment, Heaven knows how I hated her for

what she had done. She had taken her revenge on me, had succeeded in planting the first sting in my darling's heart. I vowed a mighty vow that it should be the last.

"I am sorry she has vexed you," I said, trying to speak lightly. "Maud Lacy is a little high-falutin——"

"A little what?"

"A little prone to take exaggerated views, and she likes to be first. If we were to live in Helston, she would probably run to our house without ceasing for a while, and then drop us like hot coals. It's a way she has. Did you answer her letter?"

She colored a little as she replied:

"I have tried to a great many times, but I have never been able to write what seemed the right thing. I shall try again after you are gone."

"Don't," I said brusquely. "There is n't the ghost of a reason why you should carry on a correspondence with Maud Lacy. She is a person with little or nothing to do, and she has a voluminous correspondence already. I'll tell her you got it all right when I get back. Now let's drop this subject and talk about ourselves."

"We have been talking about ourselves," she said with her little demure smile. "I don't know anything that could concern us more. You see, I want to do the right thing, to make you very happy. Above all, your home must be a place where all your friends will be welcome, or it will not be worth calling a home."

What could I do, then, but take her in my arms, and assure her that my home was in the heaven of her eyes, and that if I had my way all else would be shut out? I managed to reassure her wholly, and the rest of our brief holiday together had no cloud upon it. But when I was away from her I thought a good deal about Maud Lacy and the trick she had played me. I determined to have it out with her directly I got back.

But when I did, other things claimed my attention. I found that my father's activity on my behalf had already borne fruit. I was summoned to a meeting of our directors in London, and informed that they had decided to give me the managership of their new branch at Finchley.

Hester and I were married in October of the same year.

CHAPTER VI

When we settled in Finchley the building boom in the northern suburbs was just beginning. The bank premises occupied a commanding site in the main thoroughfare, and had a line of new shops with dwellings above stretching away to the right towards Whetstone. We had a commodious modern house above the bank, of which we were the first tenants, but there was no garden. We felt the deprivation less, however, as we had woods and fields within a stone's throw. The beautiful old houses flanking both sides of the Great North Road were still the homes of those who had family associations with the neighborhood, and who were loath to go. But the doom of some had already been pronounced; great hoardings were to be seen here and there behind the front railings of delectable gardens, and the activity of the speculative builder was in the air. Two means of communication with London were open to us: the train to King's Cross, and the rumbling, old-fashioned green omnibus which ran between Finchley and Oxford Circus, taking nearly two hours in the process. Hester loved that omnibus, and invariably travelled by it when going in alone or to meet me in town. These were leisurely

days with us, and very happy ones, though the first year of our married life was not without its keen anxieties.

To start a new branch of a business anywhere is a crucial test of a man, and if responsibility makes a man, then undoubtedly I found myself with enough on my shoulders. My directors did not worry me, that was no part of their policy, but they watched with Argus eyes, noted every turn and twist, every indication of progress; I sometimes imagined that they spotted a new customer by instinct.

They were just masters, but at no time conspicuous for generosity. They gave their servants their due, nothing more.

My father's words to me on the last night I spent under his roof often returned to me after I was entirely outside his jurisdiction.

"Remember, boy, that your first and most insistent duty to the bank is success. I might say it was the last, as well as the first. It is only success in your branch which will justify your right to exist where they are concerned. A bank is not a philanthropic institution; it's a business without bowels. You are put there to get customers. If you don't get them, you're no use. Get them honestly if you can, but get them at any price."

There was a twinkle in his eye as he made the latter part of his deliverance, but before I fell asleep that night, the prospect rather appalled me. Supposing I should be a complete failure! Supposing for some reason or another no custom should come

to the bank; supposing other rivals rushed in and grabbed every available depositor; supposing I was unpopular, what would happen? I beheld myself ignominiously dismissed, seeking work, taking a subordinate place, reducing Hester to the life that goes with the wages of a bank clerk. All this hideous panorama unfolded before me; I set my teeth and swore to succeed. And I did.

What constitutes success in life, more particularly business success? What are the qualities which will ensure it? If I could satisfactorily answer these two questions, could tabulate some infallible rules of conduct, some definite and unassailable lines to go upon, I should earn the gratitude of thousands of anxious men and women all over the world. But frankly I cannot. Get custom, as my father put it — that is the goal; but how to attain it? I believe that success in life belongs to the very essence of being. It is personality that does it, something elusive and individual, and which cannot be passed on. You see two boys given precisely the same equipment, the identical chance — one soars, the other remains stationary or goes down.

The one who soars may very easily be the grosser and inferior of the two; it may be the very fineness of fibre in the other's being which militates against his success. In my own case I was not hampered by any over-sensitiveness. Snubs sat lightly upon me. I had no difficulty in smiling on the man who had tried to set me down. Naturally good-tempered, this was no particular effort to me, and there are

few things which succeed more readily than an even temper. It smooths the way for everything. The man who is always looking out for slights, who has rights to stand on, who takes the chaff or the opposition of his fellows as deadly insults, has n't a chance. Hester was much interested, of course, in the bank, but I fancy she never understood its operations. At my own home, business had seldom been mentioned in the house, and insensibly I began to go upon these lines. We used to have a little rejoicing over a new customer, however, and when we had six in one week we decided we could afford a dinner in town and a play. It was all very fresh and sweet and delightful at the beginning, and there were few happier than we were, even during that first year, so apt to be the crucial one in married life.

We had furnished simply, and I found, when we came to make choice of things, that Hester's taste was a little austere. She did not care how little she had in the house, but that little must pass the standard of her taste.

"I can't live with ugly things, Gilbert," she said a little wistfully as we stood undecided in front of a massive Georgian sideboard which had appealed to me by reason of its solidity. "Just think of that terrible thing in our small green dining room! It would dominate everything. Unless you are very set on it, let us have this."

"This" was a small, spindle-legged thing, with a bow front and a brass rail behind, which she had fallen in love with. The craze for old things and

their consequent imitations was not then so much in vogue. Carved oak, designed and made in Tottenham Court Road, very black in hue, and very heavily carved, represented the giddy heights to which most suburban furnishers soared. Hester would have none of it.

"Don't let us have imitations, Gilbert," she said. "We shall end by being imitations ourselves."

I gave in, of course, as every reasonable man does in the circumstances. The person who has to spend the principal part of her time among the household gods has surely the right to first choice. Hester created a pretty and rather unusual home out of slender resources, and put upon it the stamp of her own individuality. Its very simplicity and austerity seemed to reflect certain moods of her soul. She was just twenty-six, but already she had learned the invaluable lesson of doing without. Small deprivations never troubled her; she could always wait for the coming good. I, on the other hand, was generally impatient to possess; when we saw things in shop windows we coveted for our house, I would have rushed in and bought without reflection. Hester was more prudent. Our house was generally admired by such of our old friends as found us in our somewhat inaccessible suburb, and by the few new ones we had made chiefly through our connection with St. Luke's Church. All the Lacys came except Maud, who, while we were on our honeymoon, had gone to Jersey to pay a long visit to a school friend lately settled there.

But one day, after we had been married about two months, when I went up to tea I found her in the dining room alone, looking about her with very bright, critical eyes. Hester was in the kitchen, presumably getting tea, our Belgian maid, Babette of La Grenade fame, having gone to spend her monthly holiday with her married sister at Hammersmith. It was a cold day in December, and Maud looked very handsome in her furs, which sat becomingly on her rich crimson costume.

"So there you are, Gib, quite an old married man," she said in her friendliest tone. "Surprised to see me, and when did I come home? Oh, last Saturday! You see, I haven't lost much time coming to see your show. I say, what style is this —pre-Raphaelite, is it?—looks a tiny bit skimpy to my mind."

I smiled, and suggested that she should consult Hester about the proper designation for her dining room.

"Hope I haven't come at a very inconvenient season, for I had made up my mind that if the atmosphere was friendly I might stay the night. You see, it is rather a long way from Helston to here. It has taken me since half-past twelve actually to accomplish the journey."

I felt a trifle dismayed, for it was Hester's birthday, and we had arranged a little outing together in London, meaning to dine at an Italian restaurant in Arundel Street, and go to some play. Babette's day off had been arranged accordingly.

"Did you say anything to Hester about it?" I asked rather lamely.

"Not yet, only just come, but I don't want to make myself a nuisance."

"You couldn't be that," I answered. "I'll just see what Hester is about."

I went along the passage, entered the kitchen, and shut the door. Hester, with her brows puckered, and rather an odd look on her sweet face, was busily cutting bread and butter. I closed the door, took the knife from her hand, and clasped her in my arms.

"Beastly nuisance, isn't it, wifie? But—what can we do?"

"Nothing except make her welcome, and perhaps she won't stay very long," she said cheerfully.

I groaned in spirit.

"She has just asked whether she can stay the night."

"Oh, Gilbert, and spoil our little outing; we can't take her; oh, don't let us!"

There was a note of passion in her voice, which might have assured me that it was a matter of moment to her.

"I don't want to, goodness knows," I said fervently. "But how can we refuse? When I think of all the dinners and teas and other kinds of hospitality I've had at her father's house, what am I to say—but it's beastly, Hester——"

I relieved my feelings by kicking a chair leg loudly enough to be heard some distance beyond the kitchen.

"But she hasn't brought any things, not even a dressing-case, unless she has left it somewhere," said Hester, clutching at a straw.

"I suppose she thinks you'll lend her the needful," I answered. "That's how they are at Lacys', you know; they are the most casual people on earth. I've often borrowed pajamas and things there when I stopped unexpectedly. They don't think anything about it. It isn't an unusual proceeding on her part, I assure you."

She did not look very pleased. She could not imagine any circumstances in which she would behave like that; she was extraordinarily fastidious about her personal belongings, and I could see did not even relish the thought of lending things to Maud.

"I'll do whatever you want, Gilbert, of course. Just go back to Miss Lacy and give me a minute or two to recover. It will be quite all right; yes, dear, really it will."

It was. I went back to Maud, and tried to make conversation, or rather listen to her, all the time wondering how the rest of the day was to be got through.

Presently Hester came in, carrying the tray, and her face wore a look of perfect composure.

"Gilbert says you would like to stay the night, Miss Lacy. If you will, I can give you all you will require, and perhaps you will enjoy going into town to dinner with us. My little maid is out, and we had planned that."

"Oh, I should simply love it!" cried Maud gleefully. "Thank you ever so much, Mrs. Trent, but mayn't I call you Hester? Please say I may call her Hester, Gibbie, then I shall feel that we really are going to be all pally together."

I saw a tremor cross Hester's face, and she busied herself about the tea-table. Then, when Maud repeated the question, she looked straight at her, smiled quite sweetly, yet with some aloofness.

"In a little while, when we have known one another longer, if you please," she said simply and candidly. "I am a little old-fashioned and schoolmarmy, perhaps, in some things. My husband will tell you that."

I imagined it was Maud's turn to look a little askance. It was not so much at Hester's refusal of these outward tokens of an intimacy that did not, and never could exist, as at the two words "my husband." I know that now, though it did not occur to me at the time. But there was invisible war in the air, a sort of unacknowledged hostility between these two women from the first moment of their meeting. Afterwards it had to do with affairs, but at first it was undoubtedly an enmity of the soul.

Maud laughed it off quickly.

"And I'm afraid I'm just the reverse—very rapid and up to date, Gibbie, eh? I keep rubbing my eyes and asking myself whether it is actually you shut up in this dear little hencoop with a wife of your own, a responsible head of a house. I can't help laughing about it, Mrs. Trent, really. I've

known him so long, and have so seldom seen him serious."

"Come now, Maud, do try to be serious for once. Tell us something about Jersey. I hope your foreign travel has improved your mind."

"I've been living with another newly married couple and taking copious notes," she said as she helped herself to bread and butter. "It's really most frightfully interesting to watch one's friends in the new estate. They break out in all sorts of unexpected places, but on the whole I think matrimony has a depressing effect on most people. They look uncommonly as if they felt that they were in a cage and did not know how to escape."

"Is that how we strike you?" inquired Hester, smiling reassuringly across the table at me. Now that she had faced the inevitable her serenity of mind returned to her flawless.

She could not have disliked the situation more heartily than I.

Most men, given choice, would place a wide gulf between the woman of the past and the woman of the present. We got through the evening not so badly. About six o'clock we went by train to London, and took a cab to Arundel Street. Out of compliment to our guest we did not wear evening dress, so that our little outing was shorn of part of its charm. We loved playing at being rich and great, and Hester was always ready to enter into the spirit of happy fooling which does so much towards brightening lives which might otherwise be a little

monotonous and gray. But that night she was rather silent, partly, I suppose, because Maud chattered so incessantly. She was really an amusing companion, and her comments on men and things always had a little point which just hit off their weakness. She made use of one sentence, I thought, with needless frequency. It was—"Do you remember this, Gibbie?" and "Do you remember that?" until I was weary and irritated, besides fearful of its effect on Hester. Somehow she managed to convey the impression that before Hester and I met, all my spare time had been spent with her, and that our mutual past was simply a network of memories from which neither of us could escape.

I tried to regard it lightly, to attribute it to Maud's bad taste and inherent lack of good breeding, but at the moment of writing I am inclined to put it down to mere devilish cruelty.

She hated my wife; she was angry because I had married her, not so much out of the desire to marry me herself, as the grudging of a jealous nature which always aimed at being first.

Contrasting the two women as they sat together at the round table under the soft lights of the restaurant, I felt profoundly thankful that I had been so fortunate as to win Hester for my wife. The contrast between them was certainly marked to poignancy.

Maud, with her high coloring and flashing, rather bold eyes, always attracted the gaze of the casual man, and most of them looked twice. Such

scrutiny never put her out; in fact she welcomed it as her right. She knew that she was attractive, and such unspoken flattery was the wine and incense of her life. In Helston she did not now receive very much; she was too well known. My wife was like a Madonna lily beside some brilliant exotic. Her clear, pale face, which had nothing unhealthy about it, her sweet, serious eyes, her very rare smile, her air of daintiness and neatness, and above all her complete unconsciousness of self seemed to stand out that night. But she was not herself, and I made a mighty resolve that we must take measures to secure ourselves against any repetition, or at least against too frequent repetitions of such an experience. But I knew that if Maud once established her foot inside our house, she would know no weariness until she had worn us both out. She was so insistent, so overpowering, so altogether lacking in the finer sense of fitness.

The play we saw was a thing of no moment. Having booked no seats and requiring three, we had to take what we could find. I remember nothing of it now but that it was a meretricious and vulgar farce, dealing with the time-worn theme of a woman's jealousy. I saw that Hester was wearied of it before the close of the first act, though Maud followed it with intense interest, and applauded vigorously at every stupid point.

As we descended the stairs I had a sudden sense of the aloofness and loneliness of my wife's spirit, and, moved by an impulse of pure sympathy, I put my

arm caressingly about her waist, as if to pilot her through the crowd on the rather dark staircase. Immediately Maud's mocking voice whispered in my right ear:

"No spooning in pub, Gibbie. It's bad form, and there isn't any use making the other woman's mouth water."

How I loathed the words and the suggestion they contained! Hester heard all, or at least part, of the words, for, with a little shrinking gesture, she drew herself away, and there was a shadow in her eyes. It was the beginning of the fear which never afterwards slept.

It was nearly midnight when we got home, and then Maud seemed in no haste for bed. She was a night-bird by nature and habit, one of those whose faculties are most alert and brilliant at the hour when other people are conscious of fag. She took a whisky-and-soda with me as a matter of course. I saw that Hester was much astonished.

"Think I'm a rum one, Mrs. Gib," said Maud a trifle recklessly. "If you would try a sip, you would feel ever so much better. It would bring the touch of color you need to your face, would n't it, Gibbie? You look most frightfully tired."

"I am going to bed," Hester announced, beginning to move towards the door.

"All right, good night. I'll follow in a minute or two, honest Injun. I just want to reel off a few more old times with your husband. You won't grudge me that, I'm sure."

"It's time we were all abed," I said, rising and beginning to put away the things in the sideboard. Hester had already gone, and Maud rose and shut the door.

"Oh, do let's have a bit of a pow-pow, Gibbie, or I'll wish I had n't come. I've simply oceans of things to say to you. Helston isn't the place it used to be. You've managed to take something out of it for us all, and things are so mighty dull at Hill Rise. I simply can't bear myself there now.

"How is your mother, really, Maud?" I asked interestedly. "I did n't think she was at all well at the wedding."

"She grisles a bit, but you see the mater has had such prime health she simply can't stand it if she is n't O. K. It's really awfully dull since you went away. I'll never be able to stick the winter down there. I'd like to come to London."

"What for? There's plenty for you to do at home if only you'll do it. Your mother ought to be getting a rest now."

"Housekeeping don't appeal to me. I could n't do this sort of thing," she answered with a wave of her hand round the room. "I tell you what I think, Gib. Girls should be taught something, given a definite occupation if only to keep them out of mischief. If they don't marry, what's to prevent the most of them going to the dogs?"

There was nothing unusual about this remark. Maud had never hesitated to call a spade a spade, and the talk between us had often been like talk

between men. But somehow I did not care about it now. I had such a different environment; already a touch of Hester's fastidiousness tinged my thoughts. I even wondered how I had ever thought Maud Lacy's type of woman attractive for a moment. Maud was quick enough. If she did not actually guess my thought, she suspected its trend. She yawned and threw her arms up.

"You're mighty slow, Gibbie. Heavens, what a change in a couple of months! A nice tame cat you'll be in a couple of years. I could n't have believed it unless I had seen it with these bright eyes. Well, good night; one more illusion gone, one more tie snapped! Good night."

She looked at me rather daringly as our hands met, and then she suddenly lifted her head and kissed me.

"I said I'd do it, and I have, but the flavor's gone. Good night, old married man. I can't think what you've got in exchange for the freedom she's put in her pocket."

She went out as she said these words, and next moment I heard the door of her room slam.

The atrocious bad taste of her remarks, the atmosphere she had created, filled me with unspeakable disgust and loathing. I even put up my hand to brush away the kiss she had left. I felt for the moment that I could not go to my wife's room until I had had a breath of pure air. I lifted the window and put my head out into the cold, starry night and let the frosty wind sweep through the room.

Then I sat down to take a composing smoke and

to ponder on what had happened. The one gleam was that Maud, evidently deeply disappointed with her first visit to us, would probably not care to repeat it. I fervently hoped she would not. There was not a chance of happiness or peace for us in her vicinity.

I had seen how perturbed Hester's spirit had been all the evening, and I could not foretell how she might act in the future if she were often subjected to this sort of thing. But I was very powerless. I could not tell Maud she was unwelcome, and she was not one to have an intuition in any direction other than that which pleased herself.

When I got to our room, I found Hester sitting up in bed reading. She had a little fluffy white wrap about her shoulders, which seemed to accentuate her delicacy of coloring, her pure sweetness. I felt mightily moved. I got down on my knees by the bed, and took her hands in mine, and bent my hot face on them. She smiled on me with the mother-look in her eyes.

"What is it, dear?" she said caressingly, but never had I felt her aloofness more.

"I'm thanking God for you, my darling, my own wife."

She bent her head low to mine, and for a moment everything else was blotted out.

"Gilbert," she said suddenly when I rose, "will you lock our door? I would like it locked to-night."

I understood and shared her feeling. I walked across the room and softly turned the key in the lock.

CHAPTER VII

Immediately we settled in our new home we began to attend the parish church of St. Luke's. I mention this because her religious and church life embodied so great a part of my wife's interests that no portrait of her would be complete without it.

In less than a month's time the rector, the Rev. Gabriel Jermyn, and his wife came to call. I was summoned by Babette to come up from the bank, and when I entered the room I experienced a moment of painful and almost unconquerable shyness. Such people had not hitherto come much within my region of things.

I had been brought up rather godlessly. After my mother's death my father dropped all church-going, and we were outside the pale of ordinary church life. Our Aunt Sophia, who brought us up, was a Dissenter, and attended with exemplary regularity the Congregational Chapel in Helston, of which she was a shining light. Every evening there seemed to be something on at that vigorous Bethel, and our evening meal was always being hurried over in consequence. My father never grumbled, however. If his sister chose to take her pleasure thus, he was the last man to interfere. But he forbade

her to take us. He had odd ideas about the rearing of children, and thought that they should be allowed to grow untrammelled and unfettered like flowers. Aunt Sophia thought this a shocking idea, and she tried to do her duty by private talks with us, austere example, and by prayer.

All this did not affect me in the smallest degree. I had little love for Aunt Sophia, and absolutely no respect. To me she was merely a tiresome and uninteresting necessity. She was as plain-looking as my father was handsome. People who are pleasing to look at have no idea of their power over the young mind. It is an odd trait in the child's character that while he will positively love and adore an ugly inanimate object, such as a battered wooden doll or the mere remnant of a horse, he will not forgive ugliness in a human being. It seems to outrage his sense of fitness, and he seldom fails to make his opinion known. I believe that Aunt Sophia, a good-living, well-meaning sort of woman, had a very poor time of it in our house.

My regular church-going, then, may be said to have commenced with my marriage. It never occurred to Hester that there was any other way of spending the Sunday. I need not deny that I found the new order of things a trifle irksome.

At Helston it had been my invariable custom to sleep late, unless a golf match or other form of sport took me early afield, to lounge about in the garden or the house till our early dinner, and then to sally forth on my own enjoyment for the rest of the day.

The major part of my Sunday leisure had been spent either with the Lacys, or with some member of their family elsewhere. Hester imported her school regularity of habit to England, and our Sundays were examples of order and punctuality. We rose at eight, by which hour Babette had already departed to Mass. After she returned we breakfasted and got ready in leisurely fashion for church. As I did not work very strenuously in the week, I had no excuse for not falling in with this ordained program, but sometimes I was not very cordial about it. St. Luke's was a most engaging place to worship in, quite old enough to have tradition and memory attached to it, and it possessed a very fine rood-screen which admirers of church architecture travelled considerable distances to see. The service was rather ornate. Mr. Jermyn belonged to an old High Church family, which could boast of several ecclesiastical dignitaries, and he had married the younger daughter of a peer. He was a very earnest, simple, sincere man, and his wife one of the most lovable of women. My wife was at home in St. Luke's from the first day she entered it; her spirit simply nestled amid congenial influences, which left me quite cold. Jermyn was a tall, ascetic-looking individual with a pale, intellectual face and piercing dark eyes. His wife, the Hon. Mrs. Jermyn, as she was entitled to be called, was just the opposite, short and plump and fair, with a merry eye and a friendly manner which set people at their ease at once.

Hester was talking animatedly when I entered the

room, and I could see that she felt both pleased and at home with her new visitors.

"We are so glad to welcome you and Mrs. Trent to Finchley," said Mrs. Jermyn as she shook hands with me with a beaming smile. "And I am very particularly glad to meet Mrs. Trent. She was born in India, so was I. We shall have much in common, I feel sure."

"But I remember so little of India," said Hester quickly. "It is all like a dream. The only thing I can really recall is my kind ayah, who was never tired. I remember her sweet smile and her crooning voice, and her soft velvet hand. I have often wished I could find her again, to thank her for comforting me so much. I was such a queer, lonely child, afraid of the dark, and of unkind people. I always seemed to be shrinking away."

I regarded Hester in amazement, which divided my attention, as I shook hands with the rector and received his greeting. Never had I heard her so self-revealing to strangers. Never even to me had she voiced these childish memories. Her cheek was softly flushed, her eyes glowing with a kind of sweet radiance; her whole being seemed to live. The rector immediately engaged me in eager, interested talk about the prospects of the neighborhood and all the changes that were imminent. I could see that he partly regretted, even while he welcomed them.

"We shall be sorry to lose our remote and individual charm and become merely a suburb," he

said frankly. "But there will be compensations. I hope that the new bank is prospering."

The women had already drawn themselves a little apart, and were talking like intimate friends. I assured him I had no reason to complain, though I was bound to have an anxious year.

"Ah, but you are young, and you come at the psychological moment," he said kindly. "There must be something invigorating to all the faculties in building up a new business. To create something is to justify one's right to live."

They stayed to tea, and we had a very pleasant hour together, but all the while I had the inner consciousness that these people were not on my plane. They talked of things which I only partially understood; they had a code and an ideal which to me was a sealed book.

But Hester responded to them apparently with every fibre of her being. She was a new Hester, and I felt a kind of dull jealousy that outside people should be able to have such an effect upon her.

"Oh, Gilbert, are n't they lovely people?" she cried when they had gone. "I was so afraid of their coming, in case it would make a difference to me in church."

"What kind of difference could it possibly make to you there?" I asked, much mystified.

"Oh, well, there are people it is better not to know at close quarters. I have so much enjoyed Mr. Jermyn's preaching, and I do believe that, generally speaking, one gets more good from the average

clergyman when one knows nothing about him personally."

I was much struck with the shrewdness of that remark.

"After all, the poor beggars are mere men," I said teasingly.

"Oh, yes, of course, but some of them I have met have not very high ideals. I can't think how any man can dare to be a clergyman, aspire to teach and to lead others, unless he is himself set apart."

"And you think Mr. Jermyn reaches this high pinnacle?"

"I do think so. I have heard a good deal about him already; in shops and places one hears things. Everybody loves him, and they spend every penny of their income in helping people. I am so glad we have found such a church; it will be a tremendous help, Gilbert. Don't you think so?"

I felt myself a little at a loss, since I could not honestly answer that I expected or even needed any help in that direction.

I got out of it by inquiring whether Mrs. Jermyn had invited her to the Rectory.

"Oh, yes, of course. I shall call in the ordinary way, and I shall so much like taking a little part in the church work. She was telling me about her mothers' meeting. She has it on Monday afternoons —over a hundred—and they come, wet or fair. She has asked me to go one Monday and help her with it."

I looked a little askance at this. I had visions of

Hester absorbed as Aunt Sophia had been in the whole relentless mesh of church life.

"I have n't any *very* rooted objection, only please don't let them make you forget your duty to the poor heathen you have married. If it's missionary effect you are after, there's quite a good field here."

I spoke banteringly, but there was an underlying vein of truth in the words. But Hester refused to take them seriously. At that time her belief in me was absolute and unassailable. I don't think she had even found out the worldliness of my spirit or the material nature of my aspirations.

I should have been quite pleased to have started our dual life on lines a little less exalted, and in my innermost soul I felt rueful at beholding the long, straight path in which I was expected to go.

But she was so dear and so charming with it all, that not yet had the trammels of her spirit begun to fret mine.

The glamour of the new-made husband was still over my eyes. Then I had the hope of broadening her mind, as I put it to myself, unaware that certain convictions of her nature were so deeply rooted, so inviolably a part of herself, that she would never set them aside.

"How you love to miscall yourself, you wicked boy!" she said, patting my cheek. "It is just for the base purpose of hearing me say nice things. But I am not going to this time."

I kissed her and ran downstairs to close my accounts for the day with a light heart. Things were

going well with us, and it pleased me to think that Hester had found some friends who would add to her happiness. Among others we made through our connection with St. Luke's Church, I must here mention the Yuills, Scotch people from the neighborhood of Dundee. He was a jute merchant, who represented his firm in London, and went to his office in town every day in the week except Sunday. His full designation was Andrew Scrymegeour Yuill, but his sister Christina, who kept house for him, called him Andy, and the uncouth middle name was left out, perhaps in consideration for Southern tongues, which would never have mastered the intricacies of its pronunciation.

He was a man about thirty-five, a long, gaunt, powerful figure, who walked with a vigorous stride, and possessed what is called a "golfing airm."

I met him first on the Totteridge Golf Links, where I happened to be engaged in a foursome with him. He was a first-rate golfer, with a style and swing which were a matter of hopeless envy to me. He explained it by telling me that his father had been one of the most famous golfers ever seen on the links of St. Andrews, and that he had been born, so to speak, "gowfin."

He was a delightful chap, full of quiet fun, which lost none of its point or pith because he so seldom smiled.

He told me a few things about himself, and I soon learned that he was in an excellent way of business, a bachelor, and that he lived with his sister in one of

the most beautiful old-world houses in Totteridge Lane, where he spent the few hours of leisure he could spare from golf in the cultivation of orchids in a small greenhouse. Next day his sister came to call. She was a large, easy-going woman, with a broad, kindly Scotch face, wore rich but not becoming clothes, and had a heart big enough to hold the whole world. When, soon after, Yuill directed his sister to open their private and household account with me, our friendship received a seal which was of great value to me. I rather shocked Hester one day by saying that we must cultivate the people who were going to be of use to us, both financially and socially, and that we didn't want a tribe of hangers-on who would do nothing for us.

She looked at me with her big, serious eyes a trifle ruefully.

"But, Gilbert, friendship can't be built on any such basis. You don't cultivate friends for what you are going to get out of them, but for purely impersonal reasons."

"What are they, my dear?"

I spoke a trifle dryly, for I was feeling sore at the moment because Hester had fought shy of calling on some rich new people that had come to a house near by, and whom I wanted to get as customers at the bank.

"Well, because you love them, and because they have some message for your soul," she answered in one of those enigmatical sentences of which at times I grew rather impatient. What a man admires

in a sweetheart sometimes irritates in a wife. Why this should be so it is impossible to say, since the wife should by all the laws of nature and logic be the dearer person.

"We're in the prosaic nineteenth century, Hester, and struggling hard to make a living in a barren northern suburb. These ideas won't wash," I said rather rudely. A little shadow seemed to droop over her eyes at these words, but when I came in at tea-time that afternoon she told me she had been to call on the Bulstrodes. They never returned the call, however, so that Hester's intuition concerning them had been a perfectly true one.

I consoled her and myself, the only time we spoke of them again, by saying that she had done the right thing, and that it was necessary to leave no stone unturned to ensure success in business.

"Some of the stones are better left in their places, believe me, dear," she said quaintly. "When you turn over a stone in the field, or on the road sometimes, you find things underneath you don't want to see."

On the whole, however, we had a very successful and happy first year, and at the end of it, when we compared notes and had a sort of committee of ways and means, we decided to congratulate ourselves. The bank was now fully established, and my directors had written that very day to express their complete satisfaction with the manner in which I had fulfilled their expectations. Their letter came by the first post, and was of such importance that it dwarfed all

others. We had not done talking about it, when Hester, turning over the other letters as they lay on the corner of the table, showed me one from Helston. It was in Maud Lacy's handwriting, and somehow I felt reluctant to open it. I may say here that she had never paid another visit to us at Finchley, but, meeting her one day in London accidentally, I had taken her out to lunch. But I did not tell Hester about that. After pondering the thing in my mind, I decided not to mention it. Whether I was wise in that I don't know. I hated to see the indefinable expression cross her face which any allusion to or even any thought of Maud would bring to her face. I saw it now as she pushed the floridly addressed envelope toward me. I opened it, assuring myself that it could not be of a private nature, or Maud would have found some other means of reaching me. She knew that I had still an address at a small club that had premises in St. James's Square, but I had ceased going there since my marriage. I felt that Hester's eyes were upon me as I perused the few lines it contained. With considerable relief I pushed it toward her.

"Mrs. Lacy is very ill, they think dying; she wants to see me. I shall have to go to-day."

I jumped up, for I felt my heart fill at the thought of losing my old friend. Hester rose, too, with sympathy in her face, but somehow at the moment I did not want sympathy from her. I brushed past her and went off down to the bank without saying another word. But in less than half an hour I

was back again, repenting me of my momentary indifference.

"Sorry I went off as I did, old woman, but this is a knock-down blow. You've no idea what that woman was to me, Hester, the only mother I ever knew."

"I am sorry, dear, very sorry," she said quietly, but her voice was full of sympathy.

"I'm going down by the twelve-twenty—care to come? You could go to Jane. She'd only be too glad. We have never redeemed that promise made when she was here last. Do come."

Her face brightened.

"Oh, I should like to, if you really want me, Gibbie," she answered, and somehow the words sounded pathetically. I did not then understand how deeply she felt about the Lacys, or how she was struggling against a natural jealousy of their influence over me. All that I was to learn later, when the full record of her hidden life was before me.

She went off to get ready, pleased as a child, and we journeyed to King's Cross, where we got the Helston train.

We went together to my father's house, and surprised him and Jane at lunch.

Both seemed extraordinarily pleased to see us. My father, I may say, had spoken very warmly and appreciatively of Hester on the solitary occasion he visited us at Finchley for the week-end, and had particularly enjoined upon me the necessity of cherishing the jewel I had won.

"She's finer fibre than the women you've known up to now, boy. See that you know how to handle her. A wound to that spirit won't heal quickly."

These words had surprised me a good deal at the time — in fact, I had had a good many surprises lately. But then what is life, after all, but a series of surprises, of unexpected happenings? And even when the unexpected is poignant beyond endurance it accentuates the interest of the astonishing experience called life.

"They had two specialists down yesterday at Hill Rise," Jane explained in answer to my question about Mrs. Lacy. "But they can't do anything. It seems she has known about it for quite a long time, long before the ball even, but she has never told any one."

I looked a trifle guilty, for she had told me, and I had done nothing beyond urging her to rest.

"But they don't say that it would have done any good, do they?" I asked in a tone which my deep feeling rendered curt and even harsh.

"I don't think they said that, but I'm so sorry for them—Mr. Lacy is quite distracted. The children came from Brussels last night. It is such a pity Ned has gone to America for his honeymoon. He can't possibly be back in time. It was after the wedding she really collapsed."

I rose from the table and pushed back my chair. I had had enough to eat, and immediately left the room and went off to Hill Rise.

I called in at the shop first, on the off-chance of

finding Mr. Lacy, but was told that he had not been there for three days.

My thoughts were mournful as I walked up the familiar way between the two long lines of branching trees already yellow and brown with the tints of autumn. When Alice admitted me to the house I saw that she had been crying. Her tears started afresh at sight of me.

"No, she ain't any better, sir; she can't live more than a few hours. Oh, it's terrible for us all. Nobody ever had a better mistress."

Hearing the voices, Mr. Lacy came out of the dining room and wrung my hand in silence. He was greatly changed. His fine presence seemed to have shrunk, his ruddy, cheerful face was haggard and wan, his eyes heavy with tears.

"I'll never get over this, Gilbert, never! The Almighty has dealt hardly with me! Everybody loved her, and this house will go to pieces without her."

Never were words more prophetic. In less than a year they were proven to the uttermost. We see this sometimes when a wife and mother is taken, and it is then we realize the enormous power of womanhood, its inexplicable and inexhaustible influence. Mr. Lacy did not go upstairs with me.

"Fact is, Gibbie, I'm better out of the room. I do nothing but cry like a baby, and that upsets her. Say what you can to comfort her. It's hard, by God, it's hard, for she doesn't want to die, and we can't spare her."

I could have cried out at the sad change a few weeks had wrought in the appearance of my old kind friend. She smiled at me, however, with something of the old sweetness, and when I bent down to kiss her hands I left them wet with my tears.

"Dear Gilbert, it was kind of you to come. I am pleased to see you, because I have just strength to say a few things to you. Sit down."

I drew a chair forward; the hospital nurse, after a word of warning to me not to stop too long, left us.

"How is your wife?"

"Quite well; she is in Helston. I left her at my father's."

"I am so pleased you are so nicely settled, Gilbert. She is such a good woman. I am sure she will make you the kind of home that is best for you. I am so sorry to leave Bob and the children. I've had a happy life. I don't think I would have a single thing altered in it."

I tried to say something, but could not.

"I'm not very anxious about any of the children except Maud. Audrey will be so good for Ned. She will make a man of him. I was so glad to be kept up for the wedding, and I am really quite glad they are so far away that they can't come. I am depending greatly on Carrie to look after her father and the rest. Carrie is so good; you have no idea, Gilbert; I have thanked God for her every day just now. She thinks of everybody, and does everything, and is so calm and brave. I want you to give an eye to Cyril. He will be settled in London lodgings next month.

Ask Hester to be kind, and ask him out sometimes on Sundays. Now we come to Maud——"

She looked at me with a kind of pathetic kindness.

"I don't grudge you your happiness, Gilbert, but I should have died easier if Maud had been your wife. She ought to be married. I can't think why she hasn't. She's twenty-seven now. Single, she's dangerous to the peace of a great many people, do you understand?"

I understood perfectly, but I evaded the question.

"She'll marry, right enough, and probably soon," I said quickly. "Don't worry. Anyhow, she's entirely capable of looking after herself."

"Oh, yes, I wish she were a little less capable, and God forgive me if I misjudge her, but she seems to have so little heart. She is so flippant about everything, and her ideas on moral questions are rather loose. I can't think where she got them, for her father and I have always been most strict. How does that sort of nature come into a family, I wonder?"

I shook my head. All my concern was that she should be so anxious and so troubled, and I wanted to reassure her.

"If she could be friends, real friends, with your wife, Gibbie, it might be good for her. Just now I don't make her out at all. She hardly ever comes into my room. I try to think she feels it all so desperately that she can't bear it, but, after all, that is just a form of selfishness. Carrie suffers quite as much, but crushes it down, because there is so much

to do for me." She closed her eyes and lay still and silent for a few moments.

"It's all such a mystery, Gilbert, isn't it, life and death and the hereafter? I can't say I feel much afraid, only I don't know or believe anything. I mean I don't feel sure, don't you know, about Heaven and all the things our religion teaches us. But I have tried to be kind to as many people as I could, and I feel as if God would not judge me hardly on the other side."

I broke down then and tried to tell her of all she had been to me and to others I had known, and I think it comforted her a little.

But there was no sort of triumph or assurance about her deathbed.

She was sorry to go, only just resigned to the inevitable, and no more. It was all too painful. I felt my heart heavy as lead as I kissed her and went out of the room, bowing to the inexorable decree of the nurse. I was asking her a few questions when Maud came out of her room which was on the other side of the landing.

She was rather paler than usual, and her eyes shone hard and bright.

"So it's you, Gilbert. Heard you were expected. Very good of you, I'm sure, to come down to this dismal house. Rotten, I call it, perfectly rotten; why can't people go on living till they are quite old, and then sleep away? All this makes life hideous. It's inartistic, to begin with, and altogether horrible!"

I felt no inclination to linger and talk to her. Her point of view repelled me too much. I murmured something, and with a hasty good-bye went out of the house.

Mrs. Lacy died next day.

CHAPTER VIII

Within a year the grave in old Helston churchyard was reopened for Mr. Lacy. His was one of the rare instances of a perfect love and devotion on the husband's part. No child, however attentive and devoted, could make up for what he had lost; life without her became intolerable, so he died.

Physicians assure us that mind has so much control over matter that it is possible to will to live. Mr. Lacy was an instance of mind ordaining that life was no longer worth living. There was no tragedy. He simply slackened his hold, allowed himself to drift out, to use my father's words, "having lost the mainspring, the watch stopped."

I do not defend Mr. Lacy's action, because, looked at from the ordinary standpoint, he had much to live for—his six children, some of them young, his business, the place he had made for himself in his native town. I simply relate it as an odd instance of the relentless forces which suddenly swoop down upon a man, and also because the death of my old friends within a year of one another had an important effect on my own life.

To my surprise, I found myself one of the trustees under Mr. Lacy's will. He had occasionally

consulted me about investments of late years. I may mention without vanity that I was very successful in guiding my client's interests in such directions, but I had not an intimate knowledge of his affairs.

It was after the funeral, on a bitter January day, in the dining room at Hill Rise, that the will was read, and I learned for the first time that Mr. Lacy had accumulated a considerable fortune.

He had left, outside of the business, which was in a flourishing condition, the sum of forty-five thousand pounds. This, divided among five children (for Ned, receiving the business and the house, was left out of the monetary legacies), was a comfortable competency for each child. Ned and I were left sole executors with full powers to act for the minors. Thus it was ordained that I should not sever my connection with the Lacys, but, on the contrary, be more associated with them than ever.

During the last year I had been several times at Helston without Hester, who was not then very able to travel about, and had ample opportunity of observing how matters were going with the household.

Though Maud was the eldest of the family, it was Carrie who took charge and care of it all. During that year Maud was very restless and unsettled; the quiet enjoined by their mourning was irksome to her, the whole sad change that had swept over their outlook and environment hateful.

She had said so to me quite frankly on more than one occasion when I saw her both in Helston and in

London. She had rather a fine singing voice, and in order to fill up the gap and give her something definite to do, she began to take lessons from a first-rate teacher in London, paying for them out of the handsome allowance her father made her for dress.

Being in deep mourning, she did not need so many changes of raiment, and evidently she had set her heart on her new pursuit, and was determined to succeed in it. She had even the idea of making her debut on the concert platform in due course. The income she would now receive from her father's legacy would remove every obstacle from her path.

I knew her sufficiently well to be assured she would not permit any real or fancied obligation to her young brother and sisters to stand in her way.

I saw her eye brighten when the will was read, and, leaning across the table, she spoke to old Grigsby, the Helston lawyer, rather quickly:

"Does that mean that we have eight thousand pounds each for our sole use and benefit, Mr. Grigsby?"

"Yes, Miss Lacy, about that."

I saw her clasp her nervous hands.

"Oh, good! I am very thankful! It will make everything easy!"

She spoke with a softer note in her voice, and I believe that at the moment she actually blessed the parent who had devoted the whole fruits of his toil to the benefit of the children.

Of the remaining five thousand pounds, two were

to be used for the immediate purposes of the business, and the balance was devoted to charitable legacies and remembrances to certain employees. It was a very just and well-considered will, carefully thought out in every detail. Many thought that Ned received the lion's share, and certainly he is now a millionaire, but apparently Mr. Lacy had thought it all out carefully, and, of course, the subsequent developments of the business were mainly owing to Ned's enterprise and foresight, which he began to exhibit in a marked degree after he became the responsible head of the concern.

Mrs. Ned was there that day, a striking and elegant figure in her deep mourning, which she wore with that indefinable distinction you see in the well-bred. Between her and Maud there was a great gulf fixed, and not the smallest attempt at intimacy or even friendliness was made. Maud heartily hated and envied her somewhat aristocratic sister-in-law, and openly pitied Ned for having so rapidly become, in her favorite parlance, "a tame cat."

But his marriage was far and away the best event in Ned Lacy's life. He was caught just at the critical moment, when he had begun to deteriorate both mentally and morally, and she lifted him high to a safe place.

They had now a beautiful little son, six months old, and fatherhood had added the crowning touch to his nature. I conceived a new respect for him that day, and could even imagine him in years to come a man something like his father, cherishing high ideals

of public and private responsibility, and leaving his mark upon his own place.

It was easy to see that in his handsome, highly bred wife he had a pilot that would suffer his ship of fate to make no mistakes nor to deviate a hair's breadth from the proper course.

The younger children exhibited little interest in the financial part of the scheme, though Cyril was evidently glad that he would be able to pursue his career in peace. He had taken up electrical engineering, then in its infancy, and seemed likely to achieve much success in it.

Hill Rise being left to Ned's wife as a free gift, it became a question where the rest of the family were to live. There was a codicil to the will indicating that if after consultation it would seem a suitable arrangement, they might go back to the house above the shop. Every one except Maud grasped the idea with evident delight.

They had all loved the old, wide family house with its wainscoted rooms, rambling passages, and lovely old garden behind, and Carrie at least had never felt herself at home in Hill Rise.

"I should like that," she said quietly. "I hope that we shall be allowed to go back to the High Street. It would be lovely, wouldn't it, Maud?"

Maud shook her head.

"Personally I should hate it, but you arrange it as you like, Carrie; I shall be very little at home."

Quite coolly did Maud abdicate, renounce her position as head of the motherless household,

finally shift her whole responsibility to Carrie's shoulders, just as she had done through all the past year.

Their mother had made no mistake. It was Carrie who kept together the remnants of the home, and I seemed to behold her in years to come, still keeping it together, and being mother and sister in one to the three younger ones.

Before I went to get my train rather late that evening, Maud asked me to come up to her little den in the turret of the Rise.

"You can easily wait till the half-past nine; you'll get home by eleven, Gibbie. I want to ask you a few questions about this money. What is the utmost, properly invested, it will bring me in?"

"Well, if you take speculative risks, but that I never advise for women who don't understand business, you might get five hundred a year out of it."

"Oh, good! Take speculative risks! Why, of course I will. That's my nature! I was never a humdrum sort of person, thank God! I want to live. Now I'll have my chance."

"You won't stop in Helston, then?"

"Good Heavens, no; what do you take me for? I've just been waiting for my release."

I looked at her oddly. Never had she appeared more handsome. The black clothes, unbecoming to the sallow and plain, eminently suited her rich coloring, seemed even to soften and glorify it, and at the same time to give her an indefinable touch of dignity.

"But you're the eldest daughter. What about the others?"

"The others—oh, they must look to Carrie. It's the sort of thing she's cut out for. She's run the show all the last year, and she simply loves it. You can't imagine me doing that, can you, Gilbert?"

I was obliged to reply that I could not.

"I think it's quite a good idea going back to the old show. I can see the kids like it. I'll run down and see them often, I expect."

"Then you will go to London?"

"For a time at least, and then to Leipzig or to Italy for my art. It will depend on what Madame Bauermeister advises."

"So you mean to cut yourself off entirely from them?"

"Not entirely, but every one is entitled to live the independent life as seems good in his or her sight. I've had just about as much as I can stick of Helston. I'll take a flat in London, I think."

I made no comment on this item of information, and Maud, sitting down with her elbows on her knees, looked across the narrow floor space at me.

"Isn't it queer how things fall out? Little more than a year ago we were all grubbing along here, and getting a good deal of fun out of things. Soon we'll be scattered to the four winds of Heaven. It seems positively centuries since Carrie's coming-out ball."

"Indeed it does," I admitted readily enough. She narrowed her brows and smiled a little at this admission.

"Has it seemed long to you, too, but it ought not? Is the cage fretting you too?"

"No, indeed," I said indignantly; "it is only that a great many big things seem to be happening in a very short space of time."

"Your father will be the next, I suppose, in the ordinary course of things," she observed cheerfully; "then what will become of Jane?"

"Time enough to consider when the deluge comes. I must positively go now, or I'll miss my train."

"The missus all right yet?" she asked carelessly as I turned to leave the room.

"She was all right when I left at noon, thank you."

"I haven't asked the most important question yet, after all. How soon does this money begin to be paid, for I'm in a hurry to leave Helston?"

"Old Grigsby is the person to ask; you can go and interview him to-morrow morning."

"I will, and don't you mistake it. I'm rather glad you're my trustee, Gilbert. You won't be able to get rid of me entirely, even yet," she added mischievously. "I think you'd better not say anything to the missus about it. She doesn't like me, you know, and she'll think I've had a hand in it."

I don't know what made Maud say such a thing at the moment. I felt my face redden, but I did not make any answer.

Ned walked with me to the station, but left me before the train came in, as he had something to do in the town. As I was walking to and fro enjoying

the first pipe I had had that day, somebody tapped my arm, and, turning quickly, I saw Hubert Parfitt. I had already met him at the churchyard, but we had done no more than exchange greetings.

"How are you getting along, Trent?" he asked, his handsome, boyish face wearing a very friendly look. "I felt pleased to see you to-day. I hope your wife is quite well."

"She is quite well, thank you," I answered, rather surprised at the extreme friendliness of his tone.

"It's awfully sad, isn't it, about the Lacys?—rather a knock-down blow for the family."

"It is indeed."

"What are they going to do?" he asked rather eagerly. "I hope you won't mind my asking. It isn't mere curiosity. I happen to be interested. I hope it won't mean that they will leave Helston."

"Oh, no. It is Mr. Lacy's desire that the younger ones should go back to the old home above the shop. Ned and his wife are to have the house on the hill," I answered, fully aware that I was not betraying any confidence, as the draft of the will would undoubtedly appear in the *Helston Gazette*, if not that week, then next, without fail. "They are left very well off indeed, and there is no cause for anxiety about them."

Parfitt looked relieved. I absolved him from any other motive, for his own people were very well off, and he was the heir to Gresley, one of the finest residential estates in that rich county.

We began to walk up and down the platform, and he offered me a cigar. I took it rather absently,

feeling a little remote from Helston at the moment, and wishing myself safely at home. We were daily expecting the advent of our first child, an event which gives a man a good deal of anxiety beforehand.

"So they are going back to the old house? I suppose Miss Lacy will take charge."

"I don't think so. She's going to start out after a career."

"Oh!" he said blankly. "What kind of a career?"

"Musical, I believe."

"But it hardly seems fair. Is her sister to bear the whole burden of looking after the younger ones?" he asked rather indignantly.

"Yes, but it isn't a new thing. She's been doing it ever since her mother died."

"I know, and it's a shame. I can't understand Miss Lacy; she doesn't seem to have common feeling. It's a positive shame the way they all put on that little girl, and she's so decent about it."

I smiled a trifle as I turned my head away. The cat was out of the bag. It was anxiety about Carrie, pure and simple, which was at the root of Parfitt's desire to know things.

"It's open to you to take her out of it," I said on the spur of the moment.

It was rather a presumptuous thing to say, and I don't know why I did, but he took it quite well.

"It's just what I mean to do as soon as I can get things sorted out. But my people—you know—Trent, hang it all, they're standing out for all they are worth."

I was not surprised to hear that. What did surprise me was that Parfitt should give me his confidence. True, many men had done so, and always unsought. I suppose I possessed in some degree the quality of sympathy, and I was certainly always interested. I can't explain it any other way.

"I'm most awfully glad to hear you feel that way about her. Parfitt—Carrie Lacy is one of the best. The man who gets her is to be envied."

I spoke no more than I believed, but it seemed to touch Parfitt, and we shook hands rather solemnly. I am sure that one or two people on the platform must have wondered at this unusual act, for the train was not signalled yet, and we could not, therefore, be supposed to be saying good-bye.

"But I'll never give her up, and I think they're beginning to realize it," he said quietly as we began to walk again. "But she's so keen on duty and all that. She'd think nothing of keeping me waiting till she got the last one brought up."

I laughed a little at his rueful tone.

"Well, you're both young enough, Parfitt; you can afford to wait a year or two," I said. "I wish you luck; here's the train coming. Good-bye."

We shook hands again quite warmly, and he ran forward to meet some one who came off the rear carriage. It was a non-stop train to King's Cross, which I reached about ten minutes past ten o'clock. Then I had twenty minutes to wait for the Finchley train, so that it was quite eleven before I reached my own house. Glancing up as I crossed the road,

I saw all the windows ablaze with light, and then I positively ran.

The first person I encountered on the stairs was the doctor's surgery boy, who looked at me sympathetically and said he had just been taking the doctor's bag.

I pushed past him and tore into the house. It was quite quiet. In the dining-room doorway stood Miss Yuill, looking rather scared.

"I'm glad to see you home, Mr. Trent. I was just praying you would not be stopping this night away from your own house. Mrs. Trent was taken ill not long after you left this morning, and I've been with her most of the day."

"Do you mean that the baby's here?" I asked desperately, and was about to go toward Hester's room when she pulled me back.

"No, no, my man, but please God it soon will be. The doctor has been backward and forward all the afternoon, and the nurse has been here since four o'clock. Everything's just going on fine, and your wife's as brave as she can be. Come in and get a bite of something."

"I want to see her. Can't I go in?"

"No, you can't now. The doctors are both there. Come in and content yourself; everything's being done that is necessary, and there isn't a blessed thing for you to do but wait."

I paced the floor like a lion in a cage, while the big, kindly Scotchwoman eyed me with a good deal of sympathy.

"Has n't Hester been asking for me?" I asked desperately.

"Not so very much; you see, she 's had something else to take up her time with," she answered quaintly. "No, there is n't a single thing wrong, or other than it should be, and it may even be several hours before the bairn is born. Try and be calm. She'd like you to be calm, would n't she?"

I strained my ears, and when I heard a moan I looked at her imploringly. She just smiled.

"Oh, that 's nothing. Sit down and take off your boots. I 'll pop out and ask at the door for you, if you like, but I assure you you are the very last person they want bothering them just now. I've observed that there are two days in a man's life when he is of no account, Mr. Trent — the day he is married, and the day his first bairn arrives."

The hours seemed interminable. I think it was about three in the morning when they came and told me it was all over, but that the baby, a fine boy, was dead. I did not care for that at the moment; all my concern was for Hester. I was permitted to creep softly across the floor to her bedside by and by, and to bend over her with passionate eyes and a bursting heart.

She was so white and worn, so spent with her suffering, and her eyes filled with tears.

"I 'm so sorry, dear," she said softly, as if apologizing for some fault.

They drew me back before I could say all I wanted. I was only allowed one kiss.

A little later, as we had a whisky-and-soda together, Dr. Fletcher told me that it was unlikely that Hester would have another child.

CHAPTER IX

No man could enter into the feelings of a woman who endures the pangs of childbirth and forgoes its high reward. When the hope which has sustained her through all the trying months is quenched in the supreme effort, it requires no ordinary kind of courage to readjust her thoughts. Hester was very brave, and did not suffer me to see how much she felt it. My own disappointment was frank and keen, and it was accentuated by the dreary fact communicated to me by Fletcher on that night of crucial anxiety. I am still in doubt as to the wisdom of his candor. It burdened me with a secret which I had carefully to guard from my wife, knowing what it would mean to her. We were both passionately fond of children, and the knowledge that our home could never now be brightened by them filled me with dismay.

I tried to hope against hope, and it was a subject of which we never spoke to one another. But as time went on, and Hester's hopes were gradually quenched, I saw, or imagined I saw, that her fine spirit drooped.

The distribution of children is one of the most baffling facts of existence. They come unasked,

unexpected, sometimes unwelcome in quarters where their advent complicates life; the poor man has his quiver full of them; the people least fitted to be parents are overburdened with their responsibility. And meanwhile the cry of the childless home and the yearning of the barren woman go up to Heaven.

In all my experience I have never met a woman more richly endowed by nature for motherhood than my own wife. She was quite healthy, her mind was sanely balanced, her outlook fine, her heart as wide and deep as the sea. Yet she was denied the joy that would have filled all the empty spaces of her being, and was reduced to loading one poor ship beyond the water-line with all the splendid hope and affection of which she was capable.

I was not worthy to be the pivot and centre of such affection. I never earned or deserved a tithe of the rich largess that was poured upon me. Hester was undemonstrative, her love expressed itself rather in deeds than words, in a faithful and almost slavish devotion which even the best of men occasionally find irksome. Yet with it there was just sufficient aloofness to give dignity to her personality. And her pride was high, oh, very high! She could suffer in silence, go down to death if need be with the wound in her heart, but voice it to the vulgar crowd, or even to one intimate friend, a thousand times no!

She made herself busy with church affairs, and began to take an active part in parish work. I was pleased that this should be so, for I had ceased to fear that she would become too much absorbed.

But it was a region into which I did not care to accompany or to follow her. If I had been brought to book I should have had to confess myself frankly pagan. The only part of the service which appealed to me was the music, and that I could have got elsewhere. Of the sustaining and immortal truth for which the service stood, of the true worship of the soul which renders it partly immune from the assaults of fate, I was as ignorant as a babe unborn. And, further, I was in my innermost heart a scoffer. I believed in nothing but material things.

This makes the mystery and the injustice of my childless home more inexplicable. A child might have saved me, for few men can look into the heaven of a child's eyes and deny the higher Heaven whence that pure spirit has come.

I threw myself heart and soul into the business of the bank, extended its operations in every direction, and more than realized the confidence placed in me by my directors.

I was particularly successful in the lending of money to reliable clients, which, handled with skill and integrity, is one of the richest assets of banking business. This department brought me into contact with all sorts and conditions of men, took me behind the scenes in many lives, introduced me to much tragedy of a more or less sordid kind.

Such experience is bound to have its somewhat deadening effect on the soul of a man, and I easily understood how the money lender pure and simple can become a creature without bowels of compassion.

One has to be deaf to appeal, almost impervious to pity, to be inexorable in demanding the pound of flesh.

I did not speak at all to Hester about that part of my business, though some of it she learned from outside sources.

She sometimes pleaded with me to help this one or another; then I would point out to her with the good-natured tolerance of a man who has little respect for a woman's business knowledge how impossible it would be to conduct the affairs of men on any such lines.

I was hard in business, I confess it frankly, hard and keen as nails, and, of course, the success which usually follows on such a policy came to me in due course.

When we had been five years at Finchley I was sent for one day by my directors. I could see that Hester was a little anxious about that letter. She looked at me apprehensively across the breakfast-table. Our eyes met, and I smiled encouragingly, at the same time suddenly struck by the fact that Hester looked older than her years.

She was now thirty-two, and had lost her plumpness of figure, something of her soft brilliance. Her features had hardened a little; she was altogether more matured. But the pathos and appeal of her eyes had suffered no hurt. Sometimes my own fell before them, conscious of my own inner unworthiness even when I had done no wrong. I find it difficult to put into words the sort of unexpressed reproach that

my wife managed to convey to me without any effort of will on her part. It was the appeal which a fine nature constantly and intuitively makes to one lower down the plane, as it were. I do not know whether I make myself understood, but I always felt somehow that I did not reach my wife's standard. Yet she never, or at least seldom, criticized any of my doings or words. Hester preached, never with her mouth, but constantly and eloquently by her life. I frankly confess that I often felt irked by it, and even longed for a different environment, for some outlet for my baser enjoyment. I loved theatres and music halls, and the flow and the verve of life, the clink of glasses, and the laughter of women, and sometimes the somewhat gray monotony of our quiet life palled upon me. Somehow it was mostly Hester's friends who came about the house, and though I made them welcome, I had no part nor lot with them. I liked the Yuills very well, and had a tremendous respect for old Yuill's business ability; he could give me points in financial affairs. Yet his masterly handling of them had left his sound, fine nature untouched. His heart was big and tender as a child's. But the other men I had got to know in business and on the Totteridge Golf Course (which alone saved me from despair) did not feel at home in my house. Hester asked them to dinner, and they spent a quiet evening at whist, with a little music, but they seldom came again. Something about her chilled them. I know now that she was not in her proper environment, and that though we loved one another dearly, our

marriage, looked at squarely in the face, had not been a success. But we never looked it squarely in the face. Who dares to do that? It is better not. The naked truth is at all times an unlovable and terrifying object. Cover it up at any price!

But I am wandering from my main thesis. I was saying that Hester had gone off in looks, regarded from the merely material point of view.

Loftiness of soul, sweet kindliness of heart, dwelt as ever on her face and in the depths of her kind eyes. but not all who run may read these signs.

"I haven't been getting into any scrape, darling," I assured her. "I hope it only means that I'm going to get my due at last."

My face flushed as I read the few brief words on the typewritten sheet and passed it over for Hester's perusal. The appointment was for eleven o'clock that very morning, and I had only just time to go down to the opening of the bank, set my subordinates to their work, and make for the station.

I arrived at our head offices punctually on the stroke of the hour, and was at once admitted to the board-room. There was a full meeting of directors, and I was not long left in doubt as to the nature of the interview. They were all courteous in the extreme to me, and one or two who met me for the first time surveyed me with a good deal of interest.

It was the month of September, a fine, brilliant autumn day. Hester had made a critical survey of my toilet before she let me go, and at her suggestion I had exchanged my old office suit for one of fine blue

serge, very well cut by a Bond Street tailor. I was not extravagant with my clothes, and Hester fostered in me the taste for the best. The directors invited me to sit down, and after a few complimentary remarks from the chairman regarding my conduct of the branch at Finchley, and the returns I had been able to make at headquarters, from every branch of the bank's business, I was offered the managership of a most important city branch.

I looked, as I felt, bewildered, and almost overcome.

The salary was handsome; it had been a thousand, I knew, and it was a post regarded as one of the plums of our bank. It had never been offered, as I was well aware, to a man under forty before. I was then only in my thirty-fifth year. Small wonder that I blushed and stammered like any schoolboy under the weight of the compliment paid to me.

My emotion did not displease them, and they took me further into their confidence by telling me that the branch in question, which had fallen away under an old manager who had got a little careless and slack, required working up. They told me they believed that I was the man to do it, and finally offered it to me at a salary of eight hundred.

Needless to say with what haste and pleasure I accepted.

Of work or responsibility I had never been afraid at any time, and I had served an excellent and rather trying apprenticeship at Finchley. My head almost

whirled at the prospect, because the salary alone did not represent all the emoluments of the office. Other opportunities for the making of money would be open to me, and I promised to avail myself of them to the hilt. I left the office a happy and rather uplifted man.

I made my way post-haste to the nearest telegraph office, and sent two messages, one to Hester, and one to my father, to whom I knew the news would bring intense gratification. He had now retired from the bank at Helston, and was living with Jane at a pretty cottage about two miles out of the town. He was in poor health, suffering from the last stages of a kidney trouble which had tormented him during the later years of his life.

He was doomed, and I knew could not have many more years of life.

Then I thought I would look up a man I knew at his office, and go out to lunch with him. However, as I turned to leave the telegraph desk, I came face to face with Maud Lacy. We were both astounded, and I think both pleased, and shook hands with great fervor on the spot.

"Now this is a piece of uncommon luck," I whispered joyously. "I'm just looking for somebody to have a drink with in celebration of a bit of jolly good luck."

Her handsome face was wreathed in smiles. She looked splendid, and was dressed to perfection. What she was doing in the very heart of the city just then I hardly thought to ask her. Maud

turned up in all sorts of unexpected corners. She had been abroad for a whole year, and had kept me apprised of her whereabouts by occasional post cards. But we had not corresponded. She would have liked it, but I felt that Hester would not.

But I was unfeignedly glad to see her that day. In the exuberance of my feelings, I wanted some one to rejoice with me. Oddly enough, it did not occur to me to hasten home to my wife, though I could have arrived in ample time for our usual lunch hour. I was out for the day, however, and I always enjoyed a visit to the city.

"Just a mo till I send a wire to a pal I promised to lunch with at one-thirty. I'll chuck him, of course, if you're going to take me."

"Of course I am," I answered joyously, and passed out to the edge of the pavement to wait for her, feeling that never had my sun been higher in the heavens.

Presently she joined me, and after a brief consultation we took a hansom to the Great Eastern Hotel, where there is one of the most comfortable and secluded restaurants in London.

Being early, we had our pick of the tables, and found one in an alcove window, where we were quite alone, and even remote from the crowd.

And there Maud, removing her long *suède* gloves from her bare arms, and unpinning her fascinating white veil, leaned her elbows on the table and looked across at me smilingly.

"You do look nice, Gibbie—handsomer than ever!"

"Come, come, I've just had about as much compliment as my poor old nut can stand," I said, flushing a little; then I told her briefly what had happened.

"Shake," she said, stretching her fine, white, gemmed hand across the table. "Good old Gib, you deserve it, every scrap of it, of course you do. I've always thought you'd arrive some day."

I was silent just a moment, because there swept over me a dashing memory of the occasion when I had proposed to her, and tried to assure her regarding my future. She had been very scornful of my hopes and chances then, and said frankly that she preferred something more solid and substantial than hopes. She guessed the trend of my thoughts, and leaned a little farther across the table.

"I know what you're thinking, Gib — that once I didn't justify the belief I'm expressing with such fervor. But we couldn't help ourselves just then, and I suppose the Fates had decreed it wasn't to be; well — well. If one only knew ——"

The world of regret in her voice could have but one meaning. It was a dangerous moment, and I was thankful when the waiter came to my elbow with the wine card in his hand.

"What's it to be, then, Maud — what shall we celebrate the occasion in?"

"Oh, fizz, of course; there isn't anything else to fit the case," she answered merrily, so I gave my order, and we began to talk again.

"How's the missus?" she asked casually.

"Quite well, thank you. Now I want to hear about yourself. What brings you to London now?"

"I'm going to settle down, Gibbie; I've taken a flat in co with an American painting woman I met in Milan."

"And what about your own studies?"

"Chucked them. I'd never get to the giddy heights old Bauermeister, for the purpose of feathering her own nest, predicted for me. Rudini, the Milan teacher, was perfectly honest with me. He said I never would star, that the star is born, not made, and that further I had begun study too late. So I chucked it."

"It seems an enormous loss of time and money," I observed, the commercial instinct asserting itself naturally.

"Oh, no. One has to buy experience somewhere. I'm a sort of fatalist now, and I don't believe anything ever *is* lost."

"Been to Helston lately?"

"Only just come up. I've been there for the last two weeks. The kids are all well, and going strong. Queer little nut, Carrie! You never can tell all that's inside of her, but there's no doubt she's been a mother to those kids. You'd think she was sixty-five, instead of twenty-five."

"She has certainly walked most circumspectly. Jane was telling us one day how horrified Helston was at first at the idea of such a young head to the household, but she's silenced every criticism, and made the whole town and county take off its hat to her."

Maud shrugged her shoulders, rather impatiently, I thought.

"She's that sort; it wasn't an effort to her. But I think I deserve something too for clearing out and giving her a fair field. I might have stopped on and been the boss; then where would she have been?"

"At Gresley probably," I answered at hazard.

She narrowed her brows, and finished her mayonnaise before she asked me what I meant.

"I suppose you're getting at me about Carrie, Gib," she said crossly at last.

"No, I'm not. It's ancient history that Hubert Parfitt proposed to her, that she refused him, that his people have come round to his way of thinking, and that they'll be married as soon as Florrie goes to Coombe Rectory to keep house for the Rev. Peregrine Diswold."

She sat back in her chair, staring hard.

"Gibbie, you don't really mean that! It couldn't have happened?"

"It has happened."

"And Carrie gave up Gresley, for with the average man it meant that, just to look after those kids who will go their own way just as soon as the idea strikes them?"

"It's what she has done."

"How long ago might this have happened, since it appears that you know more about my family than I do?"

"I believe that things were arranged about two years ago."

"And nobody said a word to me! How dared they keep me on the outside? It's that horrible Audrey Hillyer, Ned's wife. I positively hate that woman. She looked at me this time as if I were dirt, though she knows she could hardly buy a corset lace for herself before Ned took her up."

"She and Carrie are inseparable."

"Oh, I know they are. Carrie and I nearly came to fisticuffs over it, and she never darkened the door all the time I was there after the first Sunday, when she began to lecture me on my duty, and I told her to mind her own business. One's first duty in the world surely is to mind one's own business, and that's what I've been doing. Most people can't live for their relations meddling with them and wanting to arrange their program. I had only a little more courage than most of 'em, that's all."

"Don't indict me, Maud," I said with good-natured raillery. "I've never lectured you."

"No, but I'm dead sure your wife has had her say with the rest of them. Well, anyway, I've seen something; I know what the world is like. It's blue-mould of the soul one gets in a place like Helston. Heavens, how I hate it! This dose will serve me for another five years. Your father's going down the hill rapidly, Gilbert. He can't last much longer."

I nodded, but made no comment on her pronouncement, which struck me as rather callous. There were moments when Maud Lacy's assumption of complete heartlessness repelled me. That was one. She was

as quick as a needle, and her expression altered as she leaned across the table once more.

"Don't look at me like that, Gib; I simply won't have it. I want to keep my pal just as he used to be. We understand one another. It's a pity the fate line diverged just where it did. It was n't altogether my fault. I'm a bit of a fatalist, you know, and just lately I've been studying occult things. It's fascinating. The Fates have decreed that our lines meet again later on. Let's see your paw."

I stretched it across the table in a kind of lazy amusement. There was a certain piquancy in this dallying, which appealed to some part of me that had been pretty well in the background of late. She studied the lines with knit brows and a half-smile.

"Long life line, middling straight heart line — oh, Gibbie, are you still having affairs?" she said mockingly. "Another influence is coming into your life soon, and it's going to have tremendous consequences. But you're going to be rich, old man, rich beyond the dreams of avarice. Everything you touch simply turns to gold. What will you do with it when you get it? I don't believe the missus would understand the elementary science of money spending. She's the sort of woman, unless I'm much mistaken, who would go ten miles to find a little dressmaker at half a sovereign less but who would probably spoil her stuff, and she'd know the cheapest market everywhere."

I tried to withdraw my hand, for this criticism of my wife, near the mark in a sense, galled me.

"Oh, come, it's my hand you're supposed to be reading."

"Well, it's all there, and if you consult the oracle you've got to swallow the verdict whole. She's incapable of appreciating or fully understanding you, Gilbert, and she is n't on your plane. The stars never ordained that you should be together. It's one of the mistakes Destiny permits, but can't unravel. You'll never have any children, and the line breaks off here abruptly. Do you want to hear any more, Gib?"

"I don't, and it's time I was out of here," I said abruptly, and would have summoned the waiter, but Maud intervened with a rueful smile.

"Aren't you going to give me any coffee? Why, I'd rather go without lunch or dinner any day than my coffee and liqueur. Besides, we're not half done. Don't you want to hear all about my flat and Sadie Wilcox? I'm simply dying to tell you."

I gave in, of course. Few men can withstand any slur upon their hospitality. The coffee was brought, and the green Chartreuse, which was Maud's choice. We sat there another good hour, and when we at last reached the vestibule of the hotel we had been two and a half hours in our alcove. It was then, however, only half-past two. As we stepped towards the door two men came from the grill-room, Yuill and the chairman of one of the big railway companies whom I knew by sight. Yuill was especially interested in railways, and was always promoting new ones. He nodded to me, and glanced with a

surprise I imagined significant at my striking-looking companion, as we hurriedly passed out. I did not want to meet Yuill there, and the knowledge that he had seen me with Maud Lacy gave me a good deal of unnecessary anxiety. I put her into a hansom, for which I paid, gave the driver the address of her flat in Marylebone, and turned away eager now to get home. An odd desire to ride all the way back on the old green omnibus possessed me, and I did. It cooled my blood, and gave me time to compose my thoughts. I was perfectly aware of the particular kind of attraction Maud Lacy had for me, and she made no attempt to hide her liking—in fact, she had as good as said that she had never married because the Fates had stolen from her the man she wanted. She had in a measure reasserted her old ascendancy over me that day. I found in it a subtle flattery of the senses I couldn't resist.

Any man who happens to peruse these words will acquit me of deliberate disloyalty. Unfortunatly for us, the path to hell has naught but flowery banks, and the easy descent is made chiefly in the sun.

In giving my account of my day in the city to my wife, I omitted to mention the name of Maud Lacy, merely saying that I had lunched at the Great Eastern Hotel with an old friend I had met accidentally at the post office where I had dispatched my telegrams.

Hester was neither prying nor suspicious by nature. She did not even ask whether the old friend was a man or a woman.

CHAPTER X

When Hester heard the actual facts of my interview with the directors, she had one of her rare fits of abandon, and threw herself into my arms.

"Oh, Gilbert, I am so glad, so very, very glad, dear!" she said with a little sob in her voice. "It shows what they must think of you, and I'm just as proud as I can be."

Somehow her pride engendered in me a sudden humility.

"Nonsense, little woman, it's only the reward of hard work and close application, and you've kept me at it too," I added jocosely. "So you're entitled to a few pats on the back. If we'd had a more exciting and rackety life, business would undoubtedly have suffered."

I saw that my words awakened in her a little wonder and disquiet.

"You have found it very dull, I'm afraid?" she said a trifle sadly.

"Oh, no, I'm a demon for work, and it gave me my chance. Don't get ideas into your dear little head. Now we've got heaps of things to discuss and consider—where we are to live, for one thing."

"Live! Shall we have to leave Finchley?" she asked with a sudden spasm in her voice.

"It would be better. I've been thinking of a house in the Bloomsbury district. It has always fascinated me. It's in the heart of things, and there's a dignity about those old houses which a place like this sadly lacks."

"Would it not be possible for us to stay on in Finchley, Gilbert? Mr. Yuill does not seem to mind travelling to and fro, and it is n't really a long journey."

Somehow the mention of Yuill at the moment irritated me.

"Yuill does n't begin to know the meaning of work, as I understand it. He's the sort of chap who makes a good deal of noise without accomplishing much."

Hester looked the picture of astonishment.

"Why, Gilbert, you must surely be thinking of somebody else—little Bagley perhaps. Mr. Yuill is one of the most silent men I've ever met."

"Well, I'm not stopping in Finchley to please him. This tearing to and fro in trains takes ten years off the average city man's life. I believe doctors are agreed about it," I said grandiloquently. "Do you really like Finchley, kid?"

"Why, I love it! We shall have to leave this dear house, then?"

"Rather, as the next manager will have to come in, and they want me in the city by the 15th of October."

"Why, that's hardly a month from now."

"Just twenty-seven days; but a lot can be accomplished in twenty-seven days."

"You'll miss the golf course and the club Gilbert, won't you?"

"I can come out Saturdays, and perhaps an occasional Sunday. Sunday golf, I think, is not forbidden to the hard-wrought city man, though the Finchley bank manager is not supposed to indulge in it."

She sat still and quiet for a while, and presently took up a bit of fine crochet work she had laid down at my entrance.

"Will it be hard on you leaving Finchley, Hester?"

"I shall not like it. I have a few friends, and they are precious, and we shall never find another St. Luke's."

I pondered a moment.

"Well, we must think it over. Perhaps we might make a sort of compromise. How would Totteridge Lane suit you? There's that old house other side of the road from the Yuills—Grey Gables, it's called. I believe it might be bought cheap."

She dropped her work, and her face fairly glowed.

"Oh, Gilbert, that would be simply lovely! Oh, how happy I should be to live there, and I am sure it will be much healthier and better for you to come out to such a sweet spot after office hours."

"I'm not so sure about it. Remember, my office hours will be very different in the city for the first year or two at least. It'll mean long days and late nights and precious little recreation. A man in such a position doesn't eat the bread of idleness. Every nerve of him has to be more or less on the rack."

"Then we must live where it will be best and easiest for you, darling," replied Hester with that air of meek dutifulness which senselessly enrages some men. We are strange creatures, and open rebellion among our women-folk enlarges our respect for them. I could not help contrasting Maud Lacy's probable behavior in such a case. She would simply have said, "We are going to live here or there," according as her fancy dictated, and it would have come to pass.

The more I thought of the pretty old house in Totteridge Lane, however, the more the idea of possessing it appealed to me.

After tea that very evening we took a walk in that direction, and had a look at it, both without and within. It was a smallish house, which Hester assured me she could easily run with a couple of servants, including Babette, now an institution in our house. It was whitewashed and had a green veranda running round it, and two acres of lovely old matured grounds. It had a heavenly view from the back terrace, and was within easy reach of the golf course. Before we left it we had made up our minds to take it on a three years' lease, which, we argued, would give us time to prove whether it was convenient enough for me to live so far out.

"Let's go in and tell Christina Yuill about it," suggested Hester as we left the pretty gateway from which we could see the somewhat dark entrance of The Yews, which was the mournful appellation of the Yuills' abode. I was not keen, but, having no good

reason for refusing, permitted myself to be guided in a slanting direction across the road. Hester was a frequent visitor to The Yews, I knew, but I only learned afterwards, among all the rest of the facts relating to her, how much of her lonely life was rendered tolerable by the ministry of these good friends and kind neighbors. To my relief Miss Yuill met us with the information that her brother was dining in town, and would not be home till midnight. So often did he dine in town with business acquaintances that he kept a spare dress suit at his office, and would come home in it, taking it back with him in a small Gladstone bag in the morning. I hardly ever saw Yuill without that bag, and we all twitted him about it. I knew that Yuill did not like me; we were in no sense of the word pals, though we occasionally played golf together. He was a splendid golfer, and the links represented his only other dissipation. He never went to theatres, for instance; both he and his sister thought theatre-going wicked waste of time. He was the churchwarden at St. Luke's, and a pillar in all good works.

Miss Yuill was a trifle more genial and affable than her brother. Hester had often assured me that she was the best-informed woman she had ever met, and knew all about the new books even before they came out.

She was nothing much to look at, but I think I mentioned before that she always wore handsome clothes, and had a general air of prosperity and well-being. She was extraordinarily fond of my wife.

"Leave Finchley—not a bit of it, Mr. Trent," she said. "Look at Andy! He can easily manage to go in and out to London, and I don't suppose you'll keep his irregular hours. And he's got so fond of it, he couldn't sleep in London now, I believe. Once when he happened to miss the last train he walked out all the way across Hampstead Heath. It was two o'clock in the morning when he got home. You can do it easily, being a younger man than he."

She seemed pleased at the idea of my promotion, and not in the least surprised.

"Andy has always said it would come, for he reckons you one of the best business men he knows. He even said once that you could give any Scotchman points."

She laughed heartily at this. So did we all, and we parted in the greatest good-humor.

I lost no time in interviewing the agent for Grey Gables, and in less than a week the lease was signed. I had to take it on a seven years' lease, with a break at three and five, and I got it at a moderate rental. Some little repairs and decorating were necessary, and, looking back, I think that was one of the happiest periods of Hester's life.

She was proud of my success, and deeply interested in her pretty new house, out of which she would make a real home. But she wept bitterly when we left the house above the bank, and though she did not say a word about it, I somehow guessed that it wrung her heart to part finally from the place which had been at once the cradle and the grave of her fondest hopes.

But at Grey Gables she quickly forgot, or seemed to forget, and we were busy right up till Christmas getting all our belongings settled, and adding a few to them. When all was finished, it certainly was a home of which anybody might have been proud. Hester's perfect taste kept all in harmony with the kind of house it was. There was nothing garish or crude or startling to the eye. Harmonious, perhaps, is the word which best describes it.

I found my new duties congenial enough, but my position made full demands on all my powers. At Christmas we went down to Helston to spend the Christmas week-end with my father and Jane. He was now confined to bed, a poor wreck of his former self, Jane waiting on him with exemplary devotion and all the quiet courage and cheerfulness she had taught us to expect from her all her life.

My father was pleased to see us, and he seemed to like to have Hester sit with him. She was able to share part of the nursing with Jane, and give her a little rest. It was easy to see that the love between these two women was that of sisters, and that they perfectly understood one another. I went twice into Helston to see the Lacys, once to visit the old house, and once to call on Ned at Hill Rise.

With the new year may be said to have begun the second decade of our married life. We were happy enough, but perhaps neither of us had realized the ideals that had uplifted us on that never-to-be-forgotten day in the bosky glades of Terveuren. We had drifted a good deal apart. How does this begin?

What first brings the little rift which sooner or later makes mute the whole music of life? Ah, that question, like many another before me as I write, I find unanswerable. Instead of our natures being welded and run together, we both held to our own ideas and desires, with this inevitable result. Hester was frankly spiritual and religious; she could find happiness in quiet ways; she liked a few friends and cherished them loyally; she loved to help others, to seek out the sick and suffering and the sad. She could at all times cheerfully go without, so that others might be the gainers. My nature, on the other hand, shrank from unpleasant things. I was willing and eager to do my duty, so far as I saw it, but I wanted swift recognition; I needed material gifts to prove the worth of life. And I craved for a number of things from which I had been cut off since my marriage, more by association and example than compulsion. Hester liked quiet evenings with her books and work; her long, hard, early training had taught her to find her pleasure in the simplest things; also she could never reconcile the spending of money on selfish pleasures with the need which everywhere abounded. It was useless to argue with her. Sometimes, when I got cross, she just slipped away as if she could not bear another word.

She was always willing to entertain at our own house, and she did it well, too. I could invite a dozen men to dinner, certain that the menu and the cooking would leave nothing to be desired. But she had no desire, vulgarly speaking, to cut a dash. Had I been

married to Maud Lacy we should probably, by combining our respective incomes, have taken a house in London and proceeded to enjoy life. My new sphere of labor gave me practically unlimited opportunities of seeing Maud. Scarcely a week passed without our meeting during that first winter. She transferred her banking account to my branch, which gave her an excuse, if she needed one, for frequent visits to the city. Then, as one of the administrators of her father's estate, I had no choice but to advise her regarding her money, if she chose to ask me She was frankly keen about money, and always on the trail of new investments. I have never met a woman with the money sense more highly developed. Her consultations with me were a mere farce, because she generally took her own way where investments were concerned. I sometimes accused her of having somebody else to advise her in the background, but she laughingly assured me that was not so.

"Fact is, Gibbie, you men don't like any poaching on your preserves. But a woman with her head screwed on the right way ought to do well on the Stock Exchange, for she has her sixth sense to guide her, don't you see? There isn't an atom of intuition or imagination in your nature."

She said this apropos of a particularly speculative flutter against which I was warning her. It had to do with Siberian mines, and was then making a certain stir in financial circles.

There is no doubt that high finance has considerable fascination for a certain type of woman.

They are guided by no known laws of logic, yet it is undeniable that the few who had taken up the pursuit seriously have without exception achieved notable success. Maud bade fair to add another to the number, and I beheld her growing more and more eager regarding all the tortuous ramifications of financial life. She used it to fill up her idle time with, just as other women pay calls, or take part in charitable work, or accomplish unlimited fancy work. She did not seem to deteriorate under it at first. She was a creature that throve best in an atmosphere of unrest and continuous change. Relegated to the ordinary routine of the average woman's life, she instantly became either hopelessly dull or irritable in temper. The domestic rôle, as we have seen, had no call for her at all. Circumstances had strangely favored all her predilections. At the end of the first year in the Marylebone flat she had nearly doubled her capital, and was still going on manipulating it, with a courage and daring which would have made honest and slow-going operators stand aghast. She was looking brilliant that March morning when we discussed the Siberian business in my private room at Gracechurch Street. She was such a frequent visitor there that sometimes I had qualms as to what my clerks and others might think. There is no man immune from such visitors in his city office, and the tragedy of many a home has had its foundations laid in the private room of a business house in the city. There are certain prowlers who lie in wait for the city man under every

sort of guise, and it stands to his full credit if he escapes. They come in every guise — as nurses, as collectors for charities, as the daughters or sisters of city men who have fallen on evil times. Maud, however, came frankly as a friend, and as a business colleague.

We were embarked on the same enterprise, the making of money, and part of her luck seemed to stray in my direction. Already I had made some very successful deals for myself, and the fever and fascination were growing. There is no other like it in the whole category of human experience, but the end is not peace.

Maud was looking radiant. She was now well on the shady side of thirty, but dressed with such cunning art that she could easily have passed for twenty-five. Her life of selfish ease and luxury had kept her handsome face unlined, and her eyes were bright and clear, her whole personality breathing life and vivacity.

"So you think I shouldn't touch it, old croaker; but I'm going to. I've gone into it, Gibbie, and it's going to be the most splendid catch of the season. And there's really a deputation going out to interview the Czar at St. Petersburg to try to get a perpetual concession. Have you heard that?"

I knew all about it, and it was even on the cards that I might be asked to join in, but for reasons of diplomacy and prudence I had not mentioned it to Maud Lacy. The man who is determined to climb to the highest heights of finance does not give his

secrets away to any woman, even the one in whom he is most deeply interested. I trusted Maud's judgment and acumen in most things, but she was impulsive. Several times she had nearly ruined a project by haste and indiscretion. It might be said of her that in financial life she had succeeded in spite of, and not because of, her nature and procedure. Cautious to the last degree now, because Maud had on more than one occasion lured me to indiscreet revelations, I merely remarked that I had heard of it, and that it had been in the air for a considerable time — indeed, for the better part of a year.

"Well, if it really goes, I'm there, Gibbie; I've never seen Petersburg, and there's something in Russia calling to me. They're half savages, I know, but they appeal. I'm only half civilized myself."

"You would have to take an independent journey, Maud, for they would n't let you even travel in 'co,' I doubt," I said, and at the same time registered a vow that if I was to be of the party I should keep my finger on all its plans until it should be safely on its way. I still liked Maud as much as ever, but to be associated with her in any such manner would be disastrous for me in my present position. I was even then devising means whereby I could evade her in Gracechurch Street. I fancied that my confidential clerk had a significant and unusual expression on his face each time he admitted her.

"Oh, I know how frightened they are of a woman's

intervention. I'll tell you what, Gibbie; it's fear that's at the bottom of men's desire to keep us out of things. They know that half the time we should get ahead of them at every step. Some day we are going to rise *en masse* and show 'em, and I'll be there at the very head of the procession."

The Suffrage movement was then in its infancy, and was engineered by a band of devoted and moderate-minded women who had no part or lot with the present methods. Maud Lacy is, as she predicted, in the very front ranks of the militant movement, and has shown a courage and devotion to the cause which have astonished those who knew her best. But I am anticipating. I must get back to the discussion on Siberian mines in Gracechurch Street.

We were still in the thick of it, when Dudgeon, my confidential clerk, opened the door suddenly and announced Mrs. Trent.

I don't know why he did that, and I never had the courage to call him to account for it. The unwritten code of procedure in the office was for me to be informed of any client waiting to see me outside. Never by any chance was one shown in upon the other. I have often wondered whether Dudgeon, disapproving of Miss Lacy's frequent visits, did it with deliberation. He was a hatchet-faced young man, very reticent, a good plodder, and reliable in every relation of his life. Because my own conscience was not just then quite at ease, I forbore to question him later about his breach of good manners.

But I flushed with anger and cast a meaning glance upon him as I leaped to my feet.

Maud, smiling a little wickedly, rose too. This was only the second time Hester had been in my private room. She was not the sort of woman who makes endless journeys to town, and is always asking her husband to meet her for lunch or shopping expeditions at seasons highly inconvenient to him. She stopped at home and attended to her own duties. But it might have been better for me had she been less exemplary in that respect.

She nodded coolly and rather haughtily, I thought, to Maud, and immediately addressed me, at the same time drawing a telegram from the flap of her bag.

"From Jane," she said briefly. "Your father died this morning. I am on my way down now, but I thought I had better come to you first. You see, Jane asks me to."

She turned her back on Maud, and in its way I had never encountered anything finer than her complete ignoring of the other woman's presence.

As I was studying the telegram, with the stunned feeling which such information seldom fails to bring with it, Maud spoke:

"I'll be toddling, Gilbert. Sorry, old man, very sorry. My love and sympathy to Jane. We must thrash out the Siberian business another day."

She passed out, and Hester faced me quite pale and rather cold. She looked her worst at the moment, for the black clothes she had hastily furbished up from a wardrobe never at any time

extravagant, did not become her. Hester required soft, delicate tones, exquisite and elusive combinations, to bring out her refined coloring.

"What are you going to do, Gilbert?" she asked quietly. "You see, Jane wants me to come at once. I have just time to catch the twelve-twenty."

Not a word of sympathy or affectionate solicitude, which such an occasion might be expected to call forth! I knew that something had snapped in her at the moment, but I had no idea of the intensity of her suffering.

She was completely mistress of herself.

"What do you think?" I stuttered. "Had I better go or wait till later? I have a busy day in front."

"You must please yourself," she answered. "I am going now."

She waited a minute or two, but when I did not say anything she simply walked out. This was such an extraordinary proceeding on Hester's part that for the moment it dwarfed the other happening. I did not pretend to any acute sorrow for my father. He was an old man, and the end was not in the least unexpected. For the last year he had been practically dead to the world, and suffering a good deal. I did not follow her. It was only after I heard the jingle of the hansom bells as she drove away that I seemed to awake. In five minutes I was in another hansom, following her. I arrived at King's Cross in time to take her ticket and my own.

We journeyed out to Helston together, but did

not exchange a single word for at least half the way. I wanted to say something desperately, but could not. Hester gave me no assistance, but sat in the farther corner of the compartment which we had to ourselves, watching the slightly snow-drifted landscape whirling by.

At last I spoke a trifle desperately.

"Perhaps you wondered at seeing Miss Lacy in my room this morning? She consults me about her investments, as you know. We were discussing a Siberian mine at the very moment you were announced by that idiot Dudgeon."

Hester looked round, and I can never forget the expression of her face. It was as if a mask had dropped over it.

"I am not in the least interested in Miss Lacy's investments," was all she said.

CHAPTER XI

After the funeral, Jane came to us for a couple of months. We divided our father's belongings between us—that is to say, Jane had her pick which she put in store for some future home, while I had a few things for old associations' sake, and they accorded well with the interior of Grey Gables.

I must add that she was left with a sufficient income to live upon.

It was very pleasant having her there at first, the complete understanding and affection between her and Hester making it a genuine pleasure for them to be together. It also left me much freer, for after we moved to Grey Gables I had had sundry qualms about the many hours my wife had to spend alone. It was a lonely house, and our only manservant was the gardener, who lived in the little cottage at the gate. Hester's chief companions were a couple of Aberdeen terriers the Yuills had given her as a Christmas gift, and to which she was much attached. We had altered our domestic arrangements to suit my city hours, and now dined at eight o'clock, by which time I tried conscientiously, at least during the first year, to get home.

I was gone by half-past eight each morning, so for

twelve hours Hester was left wholly to her own devices, and after a time I had not very many questions to ask as to how she spent her days.

I had the sort of idea that she visited the poor in the few slums we possessed, went to church services and Dorcas societies, and attended numerous tea parties among her intimates. She divided her time pretty equally between the Rectory and The Yews, and her intimacy with the Yuills was the chief buttress of her life. Most Sundays, of course, we spent together, or, to put it more correctly, I did not go to town, but spent my whole morning on the golf course, and slept all the afternoon. My habit of church-going did not last with any regularity. Occasionally I accompanied Hester to Evensong, but never in the morning after we went to Grey Gables. I had not taken a Communion since my city life began. I thought little of these things, and had no idea of what they meant to Hester, how she dwelt upon them with anguished spirit. You see, she never spoke of them. Had she been a little more frank and open—but there—what is the use of asking such questions? Her nature required careful handling, the kind of handling it did not get. She never alluded again to her meeting with Maud Lacy in the office at Gracechurch Street, and I thought she had forgotten it. We led a curious, detached kind of life with occasional sunbursts of happiness and comradeship, but quite steadily and without any apparent effort on either part to prevent it, we drifted farther apart. We had distinct and

separate lives, and beyond the fact that I was happy in my work at Gracechurch Street, and had fully justified the confidence placed in me, Hester knew little or nothing about my city life. My argument, had I been brought to book, was that she did not understand it, and was not deeply interested. She knew that we were prospering, for I kept on increasing her allowances, until she laughingly said she had enough. Money makes money, and I saw my investments turning out successfully and promising to make me a rich man before I had passed life's meridian. Occasionally Maud would twit me with the little enjoyment I got out of life, and told me I was nothing but a money grubber.

On more than one occasion, far oftener, indeed, than I care to set down, she persuaded me to dine out with her and go to a theatre. I had many such evenings, and Hester was unaware that I, too, kept a dress suit in town at the club I had joined for convenience' sake.

One day, after Jane had been with us about six weeks, and we were taking a walk together in one of the pretty lanes with which Totteridge abounds, she surprised me with rather an abrupt question:

"Gib, I'm not very satisfied about Hester. Why don't you look after her better?"

"Please explain what you mean," I said rather hotly. "I don't see anything whatever the matter with her. I was only thinking this morning at breakfast how well she was looking."

"Oh, I don't mean her health—that, I think, is all

right, though sometimes she looks a little wan all of a sudden, and then I feel afraid. But I don't think, honestly, that she's very happy."

"Not happy! why, what grounds have you for saying that?"

"Oh, I might tabulate a few, only I don't happen to be a meddler, Gilbert," Jane replied in her quiet, possessed manner, which few things could perturb, "but I've been here living with her intimately for six weeks, and I know there's something wrong. So often I get with her the feeling of the closed door."

"Do you mean that she is leading a double life?" I asked with an uneasy laugh.

"No, but it might mean that you are doing that, Gibbie," she said quite quietly and unexpectedly. Under her steady gaze my face flushed.

"What Tommy-rot, Jane! Since you began to write fiction your imagination runs away with you! What chance has a man whose nose is so closely at the grindstone to lead a double life? It's preposterous, and I can't compliment you either on your acumen or your tact."

"I don't mind about your compliments at the present moment," observed Jane serenely. "What does concern me is Hester, and that little pathetic droop about her lips and the hunger in her eyes."

"I'll speak to Hester," I said quickly. "I'll ask her whether she's unhappy."

"That won't do much good, for, of course, she'll answer 'No.' She's left far too much alone. If these weeks are a sample of your ordinary home life,

it's a wonder Hester does not rebel. I should in her place. If I married a man I should expect him to give me a little of his time."

"Hester fully understands my position in the city. She understood what would be involved in the change from the beginning. We talked it all over first," I said loftily.

Jane listened unperturbed and unconvinced.

"I'm going to say something else to you, Gibbie, and I don't mind really whether you take offence or not. I've a right to speak. I had lunch with Cyril Lacy on Wednesday when I was in town, and he told me that you go a great deal to Maud's flat and often dine out with her and go to theatres."

"Cyril is a gas-bag, and you can't believe all he says. He was pulling your leg," I said rudely, but I did not meet her eyes.

"Then it is true," she said in her voice of quiet assurance, which at the moment so irritated me that I lost my temper.

"Hester knows perfectly well that I have to see Maud on business matters, as I'm one of the executors."

"Yes, but it isn't part of an executor's duties, that I have ever heard of, to dine out and go to theatres with the legatee," said Jane with her maddening straightness of tongue.

I turned upon her rather savagely.

"I'll tell you what, Jane—if you've come here as a censor and general scavenger where your services are not required, you'd better shift your camp. As

for that young ass Cyril, I'll wring his neck first time I see him."

She merely sighed, and, turning rather abruptly, said we had better go back.

"I had made up my mind to leave next week. I'm going to Paris for the three months. I may take a flat there for the winter if I like it. Would you have any objection if I took Hester with me for a week or two, now? She needs a change. We'd go to Belgium first; she wants to go back to Brussels, and we might have a few days at the sea—perhaps at St. Jacques, or some of these queer little places on the Brittany coast."

"I've no objection whatever. You can please yourselves. Hester generally does, but if she had wanted to go back to Brussels, why, in Heaven's name didn't she mention it? She might have known I would have been very glad to have taken her."

"It was your business to find it out," said Jane, without a moment's hesitation. "Seeing you so busy and so much engaged, she would naturally hesitate to make any claim for herself. Unfortunately for you, she's that reserved kind of woman. Well, will you make it right with Hester? She won't go unless the suggestion comes from you."

"She's a beastly martyr to duty, and if she only knew how the average man loathes that sort of pose!" I cried irritably. "Of course, I'll speak to her. I'll give her a good shaking up."

"When did you say you were going?" I asked, after we had walked a few hundred yards in silence.

"The latter end of next week. I'll probably stop a month in Belgium, for, of course, it's all new to me. I want to get to Paris by the beginning of July."

"It'll be beastly hot in Paris then."

"Oh, I can stand it. I like heat," she said lightly. "I'll spend the rest of the time at the coast and make excursions. I should like to keep Hester a whole month."

"Well, there isn't any reason why you shouldn't. It will fit in very well, as I expect to go to St. Petersburg within the next fortnight. I shall be three weeks away, at least. It will be all the holiday I shall get, and, of course, as it is a purely business journey, I couldn't take Hester."

"Russia would interest her. She knows such a lot about the country. You've no idea how much she reads, and she even knows something of the language. Couldn't we both go with you, and then go off on our own when we get there? We should only be nominally of the party, but I don't think two women could travel independently in that country at the present time."

"They certainly couldn't, and what you suggest is perfectly impossible," I replied with a kind of cold haste. "Besides, the Syndicate would certainly object, and probably chuck me, if I made any such suggestion. It's a chance I can't afford to miss."

"I don't mind so long as you give me Hester, and make her comfortable in her mind about it," said Jane.

"I'll do that, of course, and I'll tell you what—if we get the business of the Syndicate through with any sort of expedition, I'll join you for a week or ten days wherever you happen to be, and give you the time of your lives. I'm entitled to a month, anyway, and my directors won't grudge it, I'm sure. How will that do?"

"Nicely. I'm glad we've had this talk, Gilbert, and please don't bear me any malice for it. I simply had to speak; and I shouldn't see too much of Maud Lacy if I were you. She hasn't an atom of principle in her composition. I can't imagine how Mr. and Mrs. Lacy ever managed to have such a child."

I went into my own den and smoked hard for an hour after this talk, and then, having carefully sorted out all my bearings, as it were, proceeded in search of Hester. She always went to her room for two hours on Sunday afternoon—I supposed that she went to sleep. We had a large, old-fashioned bedroom with a roomy dressing room adjoining, in which I had asked her to put up a single bedstead, explaining that it would be handy if I happened to be very late, and did not wish to disturb her.

She had not made any demur, though I had seen a little startled look leap in her eyes. I had used the dressing room a good many times, though the door between, of course, was never locked.

I went through it, and found Hester on the couch between the two long windows with her writing pad on her knee. She looked a little startled at my

entrance, and drew an embroidered linen cover over the writing pad.

"Writing to one of your numerous admirers!" I said banteringly, as I bent to kiss her. "Never mind, I'm not jealous."

"You need n't be," she answered lightly, too. "Have you had a pleasant walk, dear, and what have you done with Jane?"

"Haven't seen her since we came in about an hour ago. She tells me she wants to leave us next week."

I stood against the mantelpiece, on which I leaned my elbow, at the same time taking a private inventory of Hester's looks. She wore a lilac frock of a very delicate and beautiful shade, which, while most becoming, undoubtedly accentuated the fair fragility of her looks. She was certainly thinner, and when not smiling her expression was a little sad.

"Is there anything vexing or troubling you?" I asked bluntly, though I had intended to be very diplomatic in my behavior, to find out things by suggestion rather than by actual questioning. But so seldom can we act precisely on the lines we lay down for ourselves.

She smiled at me across the space then quite happily.

"Oh, no, Gilbert, nothing whatever."

"And are you feeling quite well? Jane has got it into her silly old head that you are not very well, either in body or mind. She has been treating me to a kind of court-martial on the head of it. I said

I did not think there could be much wrong, or I should have heard of it."

"I am quite well, and Jane does her best to spoil me, Gibbie," she answered lightly. "I am going to miss her very much, I'm afraid, and I've been trying to persuade her to come and live with us altogether."

"That was a mistake, dear, and I am glad Jane had the common sense to know it," I put in quickly.

"How could it be a mistake? We both love her, don't we? And there could not be a more delightful visitor, even regarding her from the ordinary visitor's standpoint. She never intrudes herself, or expects to be entertained, but is always ready if I want her for anything."

"Married people are best alone," I remarked, getting out the weary old platitude with considerable force. "Perhaps she'll marry some day. I'm sure I hope she will. It would be the making of her. She's getting rather old maidish in parts."

A little rippling smile flitted for a moment across Hester's grave lips.

"I don't think there is anything old maidish about her; why, she never gets a day older. Do you know what I should like, Gib, though I'm sure I'm indiscreet to whisper it to you—I wish she would marry Mr. Yuill. It would be so good for them both, and then Christina would get away back to her beloved Glen Isla."

I could not help smiling, too; the project seemed to afford her so much delight.

"I don't think you had better add the rôle of

matchmaker to your other accomplishments, darling," I said lightly. "I don't agree with you at all. I'm sure from what I know of Yuill, and of Jane, they'd certainly quarrel. Yuill's as dour and pigheaded as they are made, and Jane's a bit bossy, you'll admit."

"Jane! Oh, Gilbert, she's a perfect dear."

"You don't know her half so well as I do; I was under her petticoat government for a good many years," I said, not caring how unjust my statements were at the moment. She had never interfered with us at home, or passed any comments on our actions, and she had only spoken now, I knew very well, out of her love for Hester.

"But we need n't waste our time discussing our relatives and friends, need we?" I asked, reproached by the somewhat puzzled look in Hester's eyes. "Do you want to go abroad with Jane just now? It can be arranged if you would like it, and I could come and spend part of my holidays with you."

"And the other part?" she said inquiringly.

"I'll have to take it out in accompanying the Syndicate to St. Petersburg," I said, and would have evaded her straight glance, only it was impossible. "They've arranged to start on the 19th."

"And how long do you expect to be in Russia?"

I fancied a little chill note in her voice, though it was so quiet.

"About a fortnight. Jane tells me she thinks of going to the Brittany coast for a week or two. She has unearthed some wonderful convent which she

thinks is going to make a suitable background for one of her stories. Do you think you would care for that kind of holiday, Hester, and shall I come to you there, or meet you in Paris?"

"I should n't care for Paris very much in July, Gilbert, and, you see, I know it so very well it would not even have the charm of novelty, though I should, of course, enjoy showing it to Jane."

"Well, you and she can have a pow-wow, and let me know the net result. All I'm anxious about is that you should have a good time."

"Oh, I shall have, Gilbert. I'm not very difficult to please," she said in a low voice. "But I should like to go to Russia with you. It could not be arranged, I suppose? I can efface myself, and I know French so perfectly, besides a little Russian, I should be able to get about by myself. I have even two friends in Petersburg who used to be governesses in Brussels. I should not be in your way at all."

I was completely nonplussed by this straight and unexpected question.

"Jane asked the same thing, Hester, but you must see for yourself how perfectly impossible it is. The Syndicate consists of five or six picked men with but one idea in their heads, the successful carrying through of the mining concession. It may be a very long business, for the Czar has never been more inaccessible than at the present moment. The amount of diplomacy and backstairs influence required will pass all conception. It may be a matter of months instead of weeks."

"Then what is the use of your going for a fortnight?"

"I can't afford to refuse the invitation to join the party. It gives me a chance of insight which would not come in my way again. You are not going to be selfish, Hester? You never have been so, and you know how important these things are."

"I don't want to be selfish, of course. I hope you haven't found me so, but what I would like to know is why Jane and I could not join the party as well as Miss Lacy."

I started and I felt my color rise.

"Who told you Miss Lacy was going?"

"Cyril."

"Cyril's a meddlesome young ass, and wants talking to. His sister may have said in fun that she wanted to go to Russia, but I assure you, if she should, she will have to make an independent journey, just as you and Jane would have to do if you went. It is a foregone conclusion that a Syndicate like that, consisting of the bigwigs of financial life, won't be hampered with women-folk on a journey so important and so purely of a business nature. Nobody goes to Russia at this season of the year, unless obliged. The heat in Petersburg will be overpowering, and the sanitary arrangements leave much to be desired. Besides, we may be going into Siberia."

Hester smiled a little, the smile of superior knowledge.

"Mademoiselle Destinn assures me July is the perfect month," she said in her voice of provoking

quiet. "But don't let us say any more about it, Gilbert. Jane and I will go to Brittany, and if you can join us later on we shall be very glad. If not, well, I shall not be any more disappointed than usual, that is all."

Here, undoubtedly, was my opportunity to question my wife more closely, and discover whether she was unhappy or dissatisfied. These words certainly indicated some dissatisfaction, but her face was perfectly serene. I have never met any one who had such power of self-control, and who could keep her dignity in any circumstances. How could I tell, then, of the fires of jealousy raging at that very moment in her poor tortured woman's heart? She had given me the worst of the interview, however, and I was only anxious to end it.

At the moment, happily, perhaps, for us both, Babette arrived to announce visitors in the drawing room.

"It is only Mr. Yuill and Christina come to tea, Gilbert," said Hester quickly, as she put down her writing pad and rose to her feet.

I looked annoyed, for at the moment I did not wish to meet the Yuills. Somehow they seemed to represent part of a conspiracy against me.

"I'm getting a bit sick of the Yuills, Hester," I said ungraciously. "We're not safe from them even on Sundays. I think, when I have only one clear day in the week at home, you might see that it *is* clear, and not pestered with people that I'm not particularly gone on."

A very wounded look crossed Hester's face, but she did not open her lips. My inner and growing irritation, born of considerable uneasiness of spirit, finding relief in abuse of somebody, I continued:

"Yuill's a pompous ass, Hester. Because he's made a bit on the Stock Exchange — and I'd very much like to get at the bottom of all his transactions there — he arrogates to himself a sort of lordly condescension to other people who are probably as clever as himself. We're not all so long-sighted, perhaps, as a Scotchman on the make——"

Hester looked at me quite straightly, and her lips were a little white.

"If that is how you feel about them, Gilbert, don't come down to tea. I can send yours to the study, and after this I shall take care not to invite them on Sunday, or much at any time. Your house surely exists for your friends as well as mine."

She walked out as she spoke, and took from me the opportunity of making reparation for my bad temper. It was nothing else; Yuill had served as a handy scapegoat, that was all. I felt that I had made an egregious ass of myself, that Hester had had the best of it, and after a few moments' reflection I went meekly downstairs to the drawing room and made myself as agreeable as I knew how, even going so far as to chaff Miss Yuill unmercifully about her love for Glen Isla. But that little talk had widened the gulf between Hester and me, and in about a week's time we parted for the holiday season, with a good deal of relief on both sides.

CHAPTER XII

Next day, after business hours, I went out to Anerley Mansions to see Maud Lacy.

I often took that roundabout way to King's Cross on the off-chance of a chat and a cup of tea with her, but to-day I had made sure that I would see her by telephoning through from a public office when I went out to lunch. For some time now I had not used the office telephone for such private messages. The American artist did not use the London flat much. So far she had not spent more than a few months in it. She was a bird of passage. At that moment she was in Pennsylvania visiting her people, and was not expected back in England till the autumn.

It was half-past five when I stepped off the hot street into the cool, tiled hall of Anerley Mansions, and ascended by the lift to the third floor, on which Maud's flat was situated. It was a hideous-looking structure, more like a barracks than a place of habitation for men and women who could afford to pay a decent rent.

The two friends had one of the smallest suites in the block, yet they paid a hundred and sixty pounds a year for it.

It was very pretty and home-like inside. Maud

had provided most of the furniture, while the artist had attended to the decorations. The small drawing room was lined with her exquisite sketches, chiefly of foreign places, and the scheme of color, if a little daring, was attractive. It made a very good setting for Maud's dark beauty, and I had never seen her look better as she rose to greet me that afternoon. We kissed one another as a matter of course, and she patted my cheek, and said in her most caressing tones:

"Poor old boy, is it worried, then? Never mind, come and sit down and have a nice cup of tea and tell me all about it."

I threw myself into a low chair covered in yellow damask, and looked round the seductive little nest with the feeling that I had come home.

My welcome had never failed me there as yet, and here I was completely immune from criticism, from blame, from the haunting sense of failing to reach an impossible standard. My wife, God help her and me, had now become my censor and judge. As such at least I regarded her, though yesterday was the first time she had openly shown her dislike and anxiety concerning my acquaintance with Maud Lacy.

"What's up now, Gib?" said Maud quickly, observing that my gloom did not lift. "Nothing gone wrong in the city, surely? The other day you were all agog with assurance over your success."

"There isn't anything wrong there, my dear; it's nearer home. You've got to muzzle that young ass Cyril, Maud, or he's going to make trouble."

"What's he been doing?"

She paused in the act of putting a match to the spirit kettle, and the attitude she unconsciously struck was very graceful. Maud was certainly a beautiful woman, and the luxurious life, the association with beautiful things, had given to her a certain undefined charm. She knew, as ever, how to make the best of her charms, and it had often puzzled me why she did not marry one of the numerous city men who admired her.

I had sometimes had an inward thrill in the assurance that it was on my account she had remained single, and just lately I had even admitted to myself that in some respects undoubtedly she would have suited me as a wife better than the one I had got. When a man goes so far as to make such admission to himself, the foundations of his house are in a bad way, and he had better look to them. But with many men such a feeling never gets further than a vague dissatisfaction to which they are afraid to give definite form.

"Jawing," I said as I threw myself back in my chair. "Jawing at Finchley."

"To the missus, about us?"

I nodded, and I saw a look of intense interest deepen on Maud's brilliant face. She was not upset, as I had been—nay, I could almost have sworn that my information gave her a certain amount of pleasure. She was never careful of the feelings of another woman, or made the smallest attempt to disguise the fact that she aimed at being first always.

"What did he say, and what did the missus say?

Tell me exactly what happened. This is most exciting," she said as she sat down and drew her chair a little nearer mine.

I had a brief struggle with myself, for at the back of my mind the feeling of loyalty to Hester still lingered, and it revolted at the thought of discussing her with another woman. I knew how she would regard such an unpardonable breach. I could see the fine line of her lips, and the deepening fire in her eyes at the mere suggestion of it.

Maud, still looking intensely interested, her bold black eyes smiling ever so slightly, leaned back in her chair and stirred her tea meditatively.

"So the cat's out of the bag. It's just the beginning of things, isn't it, Gibbie?" she said carelessly. "It has its drawbacks having a prying young brother in town, and he's crazy about Hester, as all very young and some old men are. She's the sort that appeals to their crude ideas, but she isn't any mate for a real man."

I suffered this outrageous statement to pass unchallenged, which shows how far I had descended on the broad road.

"Don't look so beastly worried over it, Gib. I'll take steps to shut his mouth. I think I know how. Cyril knows the value of money just as well as any of us. I shall appeal to that."

"I think it would be better to let the matter drop. Are you still determined to go to Petersburg, Maud?"

"Yes, of course; nothing will make me give that up. I've been looking forward to it to give me a new

sensation. What makes you ask such a stupid and unnecessary question?"

"Hester asked whether you were going."

"Why, whatever put that into her head? I've never breathed the idea to Cyril, and I don't think a soul knows of our plan except you and me. I haven't even had the chance to tell Sadie."

"It was an intuition, I suppose."

"A jealous one," said Maud with a curl of the lip. "If I were in the missus's shoes I should have too much pride to show my hand like that. I might try to get my revenge somehow; I don't say I wouldn't, but I shouldn't whine. Heavens, what fools some women are! They don't begin to know the science of keeping a man. They simply tumble all their eggs into one basket, and when it falls and everything goes smash, they roll their eyes, and demand from Heaven why they're so hardly treated. If I could string a few sentences decently together, I should write a book on "The Whole Art of Matrimony." It would be a book worth buying—especially for women."

I did not answer, but took out my cigarette case, a quaint, foreign thing, one of Maud's frequent gifts to me. Once Hester had lifted it curiously from my table in the den, and asked me where I had got it, and I had lied to her, lied straight and whole, and without flinching.

"I'm not very sure about Jane, Gib," said Maud presently, with her own cigarette between her lips. "She's a bit catty just lately. One day I met her in a bus—oh! it was last Wednesday—and she as

good as cut me dead. Very well, my lady, says I, two can play at that game. I've no use for Miss Jane Trent in future. Is she going to remain as a permanent member of your family circle, may I inquire? If so, I'm sorry for you, poor old boy, for you'll have two watchdogs instead of one."

"She's going away next week, and wants to take Hester with her."

"Then let her; it'll fit in beautifully," said Maud eagerly.

"But they want to go abroad. They're talking of Brittany and Paris——"

"Never mind where. We shan't be anywhere near Brittany, and Paris is a big place. I should let them go, and supply them with plenty of money, your blessing, and a pat on the back, telling them to enjoy themselves. Then you could have a free mind of your own, eh, Gibbie?"

I smiled back, and somehow in that delightful atmosphere of freedom and perfect understanding the trouble of the morning seemed to fade away. Here no effort was required; a man could indulge himself in whatever mood was on him at the moment, and he need not fear misconstruction or censorship even of his most foolish words. It all pandered to the baser side, of course, but most men who read these words will understand how alluring such a situation can be. The old Adam is strong in most of us, and the upward path with its steep gradients and its lions in the path seldom seems worth while. We learn wisdom sadly, and through the baser part of us, and it is only when

we are old that we begin to discern the things that matter.

I had come to Anerley Mansions with a sort of vague, half-formed resolution to try to put Maud off the Russian trip, or to back out of it myself; but when I left soon after seven these fine resolutions had all melted like mist before the sun, and every item of the journey was fixed up taut. I just caught the seven thirty-eight at King's Cross, and in my haste tumbled into the same compartment with Yuill. He gave me a curt nod, and said good evening rather grumpily. I could not afford to quarrel with him, for I did not wish to rob Hester of the friends she so highly prized, but I never voluntarily sought his company or talked to him unless, as now, I could not avoid it.

"You're late, surely," he said, and I resented the very tone of his voice, which seemed to bear interrogation in it.

"So are you," I retorted, and unfolded my paper, not intending to let the conversation go any further. But Yuill seemed to be in a talkative mood.

"What are you going to do about holidays this year, Trent?" he asked presently.

"I don't expect I'll get any," I answered over the edge of my paper.

"Oh, surely. It doesn't pay to keep the nose to the grindstone too close or too long. My sister and I were wondering whether you'd care to come up to Glen Isla with us in August. It's a small place, but there's a nice bit of shooting on it, and a mile of good

trout fishing. We'll be going about the 28th of July."

It was not in me to keep up grumpiness in view of this kind and wholly unexpected proposition, and I laid down my paper, and thanked him heartily.

"I'm sure we'd like it, and we'll try whether it can be fixed up. Hasn't Hester told Miss Yuill that she and Jane have a holiday project on? They're talking of going over to Brittany this month."

"Yes, I understand that, and I rather think Christina is contemplating going with them. But there is time later. They'll probably be back by the end of July, won't they?"

"I don't know. Jane talked of taking two months, but I don't think there is any definiteness or finality about their arrangements."

"Of course, we include your sister, too. The old place is only a glorified farmhouse, but it's very comfortable, and there are plenty of bedrooms of a sort. We haven't asked anybody as yet but the Bradburys."

I started. Sir Richard Bradbury was one of the best-known and most respected members of the Stock Exchange, and his wife was very well born.

I was more than surprised to hear that they had consented to visit the Yuills, and the information gave me an unexpected glimpse of their social standing. I decided that I must bury the hatchet where Yuill was concerned, and give Hester a twenty-pound note to buy clothes for the moors.

"They're coming for the 12th, and we've some

good neighbors on both sides of us, and we generally manage to have a fairly good time," went on Yuill genially. "If you can fix it up with Mrs. Trent, we'll both be very glad."

I hesitated a moment, and then decided to tell him about the Petersburg business.

"I've let myself in for something, Yuill. I've more than half promised to go to Russia with the Hurst crowd."

Yuill elevated his brows.

"I'd keep out of that if I were you, Trent. It isn't good enough."

"Why isn't it?"

"I prefer not to say, but I wouldn't touch it myself with a ten-foot pole."

"There's money in it if it pans out at all," I said eagerly.

"Yes, but there's risks, and they'll be kept hanging on for months. I know something about these concessions from the Russian Government; there're enough to turn a man's hair gray, and wear out the patience of Job. Let them go, by all means, but it isn't worth spoiling your holiday or your wife's for. I take it you'd have to count these weeks in."

"I should, and I'm rather grudging them. I'll see what I can do."

We parted at Yuill's gate in more friendly fashion than we had done for many months, and when I told Hester of his proposal she flushed all over her face with sudden pleasure.

"Oh, I should simply love that, Gilbert. I do

want to see Scotland, and Christina has talked so much about Glen Isla. I even know how you get there. I am sure I could get out at Alyth Junction and find my way to Brean blindfolded."

We talked it all over and in the end decided that, if possible, I should withdraw from the Russian trip, and, postponing my holiday, take the first part of it with my wife and sister in Brittany.

But I was not even then a free man. I had Maud Lacy to reckon with, and already she was proving herself rather a hard and exacting taskmistress.

While not actually intruding herself on my home, she left me very little leisure to spend there. Few men, I fancy, had ever to make more use of business as an excuse to cover up deficiencies in that respect. Hester undoubtedly made a mistake in taking it all as a matter of course, in appearing, at least, to be satisfied with the manner of our life. One brief interview with Maud scattered all my fine resolutions to the wind, and I had simply to go back to Hester, and explain as best I could that every detail of the Syndicate's journey was arranged, and that they would not let me off. The mask which I had learned to dread fell upon her sweet face when I told her, but she did not say a word. Her silence, though at all times a relief, for when a man is in a hole he does not want to talk much about it, precipitated the crisis in our lives. I feel as if I could hurry over the events of that tragic summer and all my base part in it.

Hester and Jane departed to the Brittany convent,

while I set out with the Syndicate by way of Berlin to Russia. I took great pains to acquaint my wife with all the details of that journey before I undertook it. I even showed her a paragraph in the *Financial Times*, giving the name of the party, but I omitted to say that Maud Lacy was already on her way to Russia, ahead of us. I enjoyed my visit to St. Petersburg, and every moment of my time I could spare from my colleagues was spent with Maud. She was a most entertaining sightseer and travelling companion, quite indefatigable both physically and mentally, always full of fun and gaiety, and ready to be interested in everything.

Though I had promised Hester to make the utmost haste to St. Jacques, I was persuaded by Maud to write and explain that the business of the Syndicate was lagging, and that I could not get away. The first part of the statement was quite true. After we had been a fortnight in Petersburg, we were just as far from accomplishing our object as on the day of our arrival, and already some busy members of the Syndicate were chafing at the inaction. To pass the time, while their chief remained in the capital to work up all the channels of approach to the Czar, the rest of them proposed a trip into the interior to see the actual land after which they were striving. I grasped at this chance of getting away, for the limits of my holiday made it impossible for me to join the excursion to Siberia, and I could not in the circumstances ask for any extension.

When I decided to return to Paris, Maud said she

would come too, that she had had enough of Russia, and was tired of the intense heat and stuffiness of the city. So we travelled together to Paris, and even then did not part. I had written to Hester from Petersburg that she need not expect me at St. Jacques. I had two letters from her there, in one of which she mentioned that they were expecting Yuill to come for a few days.

Maud laughed when I told her this, and said mockingly that I need not have any qualms about my wife, who was evidently having a good time.

We stopped at the Continental, and though we were careful to have rooms on different floors, the mere fact of our being under the same roof in the circumstances showed a carelessness of risk and convention which was astonishing. It was the tourist season in Paris, and any day we might run across a chance acquaintance. Maud did not care; I think, rather, that she enjoyed the daring and abandon of the whole thing. But Nemesis was already on our track. One evening, as I waited in the hall for her to come down to go to the Folies Bergères, who should come off a *fiacre* at the door but Yuill in a gray travelling suit with a kit-bag in his hand. At the moment Maud, in a smart demi-toilette and a most becoming hat and cloak, came sailing down the staircase fastening her gloves. Yuill immediately saw her, and, before he spoke, measured me with his eyes. Such cold contempt and loathing I have never encountered in any man's eyes before nor since. He looked terrific in his anger,

and I was not sure for the moment whether he would not murder me.

"I've just come from St. Jacques, and you're a damned scoundrel," he said between his teeth, and walked past me to the bureau without another glance.

Maud saw at once that something had happened to upset me.

"Who's that?" she asked with a backward glance at Yuill's tall figure already on its way upstairs to the first floor.

"Come outside and don't jaw. I'm feeling pretty sick," I answered roughly, and we were several minutes in the cab before I would deign to offer her a word of explanation. When I did tell her who the man was, she merely laughed.

"Oh, that one — well, he's in love with Hester, so you can cry quits. Ask him when you get back what he is doing at St. Jacques. You're not half game, Gib——"

"His sister is there, and he had every right to go. Besides, he is n't that sort."

I groaned. "I must go to St. Jacques to-morrow morning, and I won't stop at the Continental to-night."

I did not, and I went off in the morning without seeing Maud.

But I was wretched all the time at St. Jacques, and bored to extinction besides. There was nothing to do there but wander on the sand dunes — not even a meagre band or a casino to divert one. How women

could exist in such surroundings I could not imagine.

Hester imagined that I was worn out with much travelling, and was very kind and sympathetic.

"Let's go home out of this beastly place, Hester. I can't stick it any longer," I said on the second morning. "Besides, if we're going to Scotland, there is a heap to do first."

Miss Yuill was full of the Scotch visit, and all the details were well under way. They were only waiting for me, they said, to fix the date.

I had the feeling, however, that, so far as I was concerned, the Scotch visit was off. And I was right. The first morning I got to Gracechurch Street I found a note from Yuill, written from the Hôtel Continental. Its contents hardly surprised me, though they filled me with an unholy rage.

He merely informed me that until some explanation of that night in Paris was forthcoming, his invitation to me to come to Glen Isla was withdrawn.

CHAPTER XIII

I now come to the most poignant chapter of my life.

When I reached St. Jacques my mind was in a ferment, for I had no means of knowing what action Yuill might take in the circumstances.

My meeting with my wife was cordial enough, and Hester's face was perfectly serene as she welcomed me. There was no warmth in our greeting, however, such as married lovers exhibit after a three weeks' parting.

She looked very well, and the strain had departed from her face. Also the rest and the sweet breezes had filled out the hollows in her cheeks and taken away some of the tell-tale lines from her mouth. She surveyed me a trifle anxiously.

"You look most frightfully tired, Gilbert. I suppose it is the incessant travelling."

She said this as we sat together on the sand dunes overlooking the sea, and as the words left her lips she put out her hand and stroked mine. I drew away a little impatiently, not because I shrank from the touch that had once had the power to thrill me, but because I knew myself wholly unworthy. An immense sadness was within me, corroding everything.

I who had laughed at Fate and proclaimed myself strong to meet and conquer it, who had been eager to brave all and do all for the sake of this dear woman, was now in bitter bondage.

If, out of some strong sense of righteousness and justice, the dour-faced Scotsman should elect to breathe to my wife the suspicion that had now become a certainty in his mind, what would happen? "To know all is to forgive all" is a favorite and often-quoted phrase, but it is a specious lie. Had Hester been made aware of all the tortuous windings of my affair with Maud Lacy, her spirit would have been crushed, her heart filled with loathing unspeakable. She never could have forgiven or forgotten. As I lay there, inert, on the wild bent grass, letting the sand slip through my nerveless fingers, I tried to face the future. Of one thing I was sure. I was not yet prepared to give up my wife, to break the bond that had bound us all these years. I raised my head and looked at her long and intently, and with such questioning in my eyes that I could see it troubled her.

"What is it, Gibbie?" she asked with a tender note in her voice which nearly broke me down. For one mad moment I was tempted to make a clean breast there on the edge of the fathomless and spreading sea, to throw myself on her mercy, and leave myself wholly in her hands. Probably if I had obeyed that heaven-sent impulse things might have mended, and together we might have made something of what was left.

"No more Syndicates," she said, shaking her finger at me. "I really think I must try to put a stop to all this frenzied finance, Gilbert. What is it for, anyhow? We have enough for our simple needs. May I say something quite frankly?"

"Why, of course; it's what I want to hear," I answered; but I pulled my panama over my brows so that my eyes were hidden. She was knitting a sock just then, and for the moment her white fingers ceased their skillful plying.

"I have been thinking over a great many things, Gilbert, since I came to this quiet, delightful spot, and a sort of clear vision has come to me."

"What of?" I asked weakly.

"Of our life. Don't you feel that there is a crisis in it? We are drifting, and if something is n't done, I don't know where we shall land, if, indeed, we ever land at all, anywhere."

She never spoke a truer word.

"Oh, nonsense," I said, trying to speak lightly. "You are hipped; you were needing your holiday badly. Things will be all right when we get home."

"Do you think so?" she asked with a weak little wistful smile. "But I don't see just what is going to make them right. We shall go back, and the city will swallow you, and I shall go my lonely way as before."

"But you have troops of friends, and I hear about you everywhere."

She pushed back my hat so that she might look deep into my eyes.

"A woman must fill up with something, dear, but just lately I have felt so weak and faint in spirit, as if I could not go on. We must rebuild our house, Gibbie."

"It's no time since I paid a fairly heavy bill for repairs," I said fatuously.

"It is our house of the spirit I'm talking about, Gibbie, and you know it."

What could I say to that? It was what I wanted to do, beyond everything—but how?

"Supposing I admit that we do want a few repairs. I'm not altogether to blame, Hester. You've suffered other people to absorb you. How often have I wanted you to go to town with me, but always you had some futile, piffling church or social engagement. A man like me gets fed up with stuff like that. It has n't any part nor lot in the life of a real virile man."

"But it ought to have, Gilbert. Life can't be all selfish striving and enjoyment."

"The laborer is worthy of his hire, and all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." I rolled out my platitudes glibly, glad of them to cover the strain of the moment.

"Listen, Gilbert," and her cool, soft hand closed over mine a moment. "I am sorry that I have fallen short. Perhaps you should have married a different sort of woman. I may have made mistakes. I see that I have. Let us begin again. But before we can, we must get out of London."

"But I could n't live farther out, dear; even Finchley is inconvenient at times."

"I don't mean that. Could n't you give up Gracechurch Street and ask for an appointment in the country?"

I turned my head and stared at her slowly.

"Do you know what you're asking, Hester?"

"Perfectly," she answered quietly. "I want to get clean away with you right down into the country, miles from London, to Devonshire or Cornwall, as far as it is possible to go without leaving England."

"And give up a thousand a year and its chances for a measly four or five hundred and the deadly vegetation of provincial life," I echoed. "Why, no sane woman would advance such a proposal."

"I think I'm perfectly sane. I wish that you had never taken Gracechurch Street, Gilbert. I wish that you were in Finchley, as you were at the beginning."

"Which would mean that my business life had been a failure."

"There are other kinds of failures," she said on the spur of the moment.

I bit my lip and drew myself up, glad, perhaps, of the chance to prove myself aggrieved. "Now I know your true opinion of me," I said rather bitterly, "Well, when you and your pious friends are weighing me up, and damning me generally, it might be just as well to inquire into the contributory causes."

I picked myself up and walked away, to find Pierre, the old boatman, to take me out, and I left my wife to chew the cud of such reflections as my words had

awakened. I was out of temper; all my feelings had jagged edges. I was wretched to the last degree. We did not meet till dinner time, and then I told Hester briefly I was going back to London next day, and that she could come or remain with her friends just as she pleased.

Her manner was a little aloof. I had closed the door, and it was the last glimpse I had of the inner sanctuary, the last — God help me — of my wife's heart!

"They are all going back on Saturday. It is Monday we are to leave for Scotland," she reminded me with that hesitating, shrinking manner which always came to her when she was not sure of me.

"I'm not going to Scotland. This is the fourth week of my holiday. I shall have to go back to business at once. Dudgeon leaves on the second. But that's no reason why you shouldn't go."

I saw her eyes fill as she turned away. I knew afterwards how her heart had built itself on the Scotch visit, how she had hoped for peace and healing for us both from contact with the everlasting hills. But she never spoke a word. Oh, that silence, so full of eloquence, so overwhelming to the man who realizes that it hides the deeps! I left her after dinner, and took a stroll through the old Breton village; looked at the women knitting at their doors with that look of patient, dumb endurance on their faces. For the nonce all women seemed to wear for me the face of the accusing angel. We had to be inside the convent at half-past nine, when the gates

were closed, and my brief experience of the cloistered life ended in the morning, when Hester and I left rather hurriedly together. If Miss Yuill and Jane wondered, they at least made no remark, but said they would follow on Saturday. I was thankful to get back to London, and immediately found a certain amount of solace in plunging headlong into business. I had not heard from Maud Lacy since I left her with such scant courtesy in Paris, and I certainly made no inquiry regarding her. Just then I was cursing her in my inmost soul; the spell was broken, and I had no desire to see her again.

But there was not the smallest chance of that. I knew her too well, and that she would lose no time in hunting me up. But I had finally made up my mind to break with her, to tell her our foolish friendship, which had drifted into something more serious, must come to an end. When a man has such an ordeal in front of him his mind has not many spaces left for minor affairs.

Miss Yuill and Jane returned on Saturday, and on Monday the trio departed for the north. As Hester clung to me for a moment on the platform at King's Cross with such mute anguish of appeal in her eyes, my heart melted within me.

"Darling, I'm sorry!" I cried with all my soul in my eyes and voice, "I'll try to be better. I'll come up for a long week-end and fetch you home, and we'll talk over everything and see whether we can't make something better of it."

Her eyes brightened and beamed on me with all

the love of her faithful heart, the love that had never swerved from me in all the years we had been together. Once more I felt myself lifted up, as I had been in those glad days at Terveuren, when all the world was young, and we had love and to spare. I went on to Gracechurch Street and put in a hard day at my desk, trying to find solace and diversion in my work.

I called in Dudgeon, arranged with him about his holiday, giving him a few extra days, complimented him on his faithfulness, and, generally speaking, put in a satisfactory day. I went home early and spent a good hour with the gardener at Grey Gables, making all sorts of suggestions for its improvement. I could see that my sudden interest was rather puzzling to Rickett, who for the life of him could not help dragging his mistress's name into every discussion.

"Perhaps the missus would n't like this, sir," he would say, or "The missus said she wanted aubretia all over that hanging border for the spring."

I remembered that Hester had spoken of a rock garden and we discussed that and picked out a suitable place for it, and I went indoors to draw a plan of it. If only I could do something to please her, that was my high desire!

Next day I came home even earlier and went to the golf course, where I played a foursome with three men I had never met before. We had such a good match that we dined together in the club after, and I went home about nine and wrote a long letter to

Hester. Next morning's post brought one from her written the morning after her arrival. It is before me on the desk as I write. After giving some details about the journey, and some little description of Yuill's beautiful shooting lodge, which appeared to be a more pretentious place than he had led us to expect, she wrote about our private affairs.

"I am thinking a great deal, naturally, about what we talked of at St. Jacques the other day, and I think that perhaps this little separation will be good for us. I am sure this place has a message for me. Its majesty and beauty bring one near to God, and seem to show up the littleness of human affairs. This morning I awoke quite early, and after I had watched a most wonderful sunrise on the little loch below the house, I crept back to bed and began to go over things in my mind. We have been married twelve years, Gilbert; it seems almost incredible, but on the anniversary of our wedding, I want you to come away with me back to Lucerne for another honeymoon, where we shall blot out, if we can, all the years that have been between. We have not had the happiness we hoped for, and now I am blaming myself very much. I can see wherein I have failed. I have even been selfish in my desire to live the life I liked. I have not given enough thought to your point of view. I have forgotten how different everything looks to a man, and that it is not possible for him ever to be content with the things that fill up a woman's life. I had an impossible ideal in front of me. I suppose it was the austerity of my upbringing,

and I have always been a little afraid of the actual facts of life and experience. I have shrunk from them. I often ask myself why God did not give me children to broaden my outlook, and give me fuller knowledge of life. I want you to forgive me all the disappointment I have caused you, my dear husband, and when we begin again, as we are going to do in October, I shall try to be different. I am willing, if you desire it still, to leave Finchley, though I shall give up Grey Gables with a pang. But if we have fresh surroundings it will be easier and better for us both. You will show me what you want, and I will do it—sure you will never ask me to do or to be anything that would jar upon my principles. I want to thank you for the happiness you have given me. At times, until quite lately, we have been very happy. I am thinking as I write of all the women who have never tasted love, who do not know what wedded happiness can be. And I have had my share. Never think anything different from that, Gilbert, and I am thanking you for it now from my heart. I see that I have brooded too much, have been too introspective. But you are going to teach me to take things more lightly, and to be happy in your way when October comes."

I laid down the letter with a curious sick apprehension, and I could not finish my breakfast. I did not want such a letter; it was not one which a man with something on his conscience could read with pleasure. Her wistful humility stung like a

two-edged sword. I crushed it in my pocket and left the house, thinking I would wire to her in the course of the morning, and write her another letter in office hours, if I had time. There was a heavy postbag. Dudgeon was away, and I had not given instructions to anybody else to open the bag, or sort out the stuff, and I addressed myself to the morning's task with as much energy as I could muster. But my thoughts were in far Glen Isla. I was trying to picture Hester wandering by the side of the little loch, and pondering by what means I could get there. I had even in contemplation an explanatory letter to Yuill which would pave the way.

But that letter was never written; none of them were. About eleven o'clock, just as I had got through with the bulk of my business correspondence, a telegraph message was brought to me.

It was from Yuill at Glen Isla, and these were the words it contained: "Come at once. Urgent." No explanation, no hint of what had happened, only these maddening, inscrutable words. I grasped at a time-table, found I could catch a train at two-twenty, and at two o'clock I was at King's Cross.

I knew that it was useless to telegraph inquiries, for Hester had told me Brean Lodge was ten miles from the station at Alyth Junction, and that they had only one post in the day.

I arrived at Dundee about four o'clock in the morning, and found I had to wait until six before I could get a train to Alyth. The distance was too great to compass except by train, and I had no choice

but to go into the hotel and snatch an hour's sleep. At ten minutes past seven I arrived at Alyth, and Yuill was on the platform. I stalked up to him and glared into his big-featured, solemn face almost savagely.

"What has happened? Is my wife ill?"

"She's dead," he answered, without taking the smallest trouble to pick his words or soften the blow. I stared at him unconvinced.

"Dead! What of? Was it an accident?"

"No accident—heart failure. Come outside; the drag is there, and I'll tell you as we drive up."

He did not speak a single word of condolence or sympathy, simply related hard facts. I followed him out into the delicious wonder of the summer morning, like a man in a dream.

A high, smart, yellow-painted drag, with two magnificent black horses, stood there in charge of a station loafer. Yuill took the reins, leaped to the box-seat, and motioned me to a place beside him. All the time it was as if he abstained from looking at me, resolutely doing what was necessary, and no more.

"What happened?" I asked desperately. "Please to remember the hell I've been in since I got your telegram sixteen hours ago, and be as brief and as explicit as you can."

"It was yesterday morning," he said curtly. "We had all breakfasted together, and we were exploring the postbag before going out to the moor. We were all out on the terrace. Your wife had two

letters. While she was reading one she seemed to faint away. We tried to restore her, and sent to a neighboring lodge where we knew a doctor was among the guests. When he came over he said she had died of heart failure."

"But why?" I asked dully. "Had she had any heart disease?"

"That I didn't ask him. It was the direct result of shock, caused, as your sister will tell you, by the perusal of one of the letters she got."

"Who was it from?" I asked, not caring, in my desperation and anguish, though the whole world knew what I had done.

"That I don't know. Your sister took possession of the letters. She will give them to you, doubtless, or tell you what you wish to know."

After that a silence as of the grave fell between us, and we drove through the glory of the morning into the heart of the everlasting hills where she had found the peace and oblivion for which her tortured spirit had longed.

We came, in little over an hour's time, for the horses did not lag on the hilly way, to the beautiful old house standing sheer against the belt of firs, with the heather hill behind it, and the moor in front.

Its beauty seemed to make a mock of me, and the sun was all aglow, as if it had no kinship with human pain.

I passed into the house, and they took me somewhere to a room, where Jane, like a Nemesis, was

awaiting my coming. She had no welcome for me, not any word of sympathy. Her eyes, like those of a stranger, looked into mine; her voice, cold and distant and menacing, broke the dreary stillness. These were the words she said:

"She is dead. You have killed the sweetest soul God ever made. I pray He may forgive you, for I never can!"

CHAPTER XIV

I stared at her stupidly, uncomprehendingly, conscious of nothing but an amazing deadening of all sensation. I suffered no pain, no apprehension, no shame, though my own sister's eyes were full of a matchless scorn and contempt. I only wanted to know.

"Yuill spoke of a letter or letters she received. Who were they from?" I asked calmly.

A small bag of black velvet with a silver mount hung by her side; she opened it with a snap, and took out a crushed sheet.

"There's the precious thing that killed her, and why God permits you and such men as you, Gilbert, to live and poison the pure air of Heaven, He alone knows."

I was still unconscious of shame, though I felt the color slowly mounting to my face. I took the thing, and saw it was in Maud's stylish handwriting. I read no further than the first sentence—"Darling old boy"—then crushed it in my pocket, and looked straightly at Jane.

"Where is she?" I asked roughly.

"Upstairs. I have the key of her room, and I don't know whether I am going to let you see her,"

she said steadily. "She does not belong to you any more. You cast her off. You hurt her and were cruel. I have sworn that none except those who loved her shall go near or touch her now."

Then something seemed to break within me, and I gave a great cry.

"But I love her, God in Heaven knows I do! Stand aside, woman, and let me go to her. She's mine, I tell you, mine, and not all the powers of Heaven or hell will keep me from her."

I saw her shrink from the torrent of my woe. She stood aside, opened the door, suffered me to pass out. She seemed to realize that the deeps were opened, and that for once in my poor mockery of a life the truth had spoken in me. I followed her up the winding stair, and she opened a door. I entered, and it was closed behind me. I was alone with my dead.

It was a holy place. They who understood her had not sought to shut out the sun, which lay upon the large wide room in a mellow flood.

I saw nothing but the bed, a great four-poster hung with old-fashioned chintz and covered with something made of lace, pure white as the snow.

I moved across the sunny floor, and so stood, looking down upon that which lay so still and motionless, the empty shrine whence the pure spirit had fled. She might have been asleep, so serene was the face, so unlike the hideous thing we call death. Her hands were clasped above a spray of white heather. I had another in my breast pocket which she had sent me in her letter, telling me it was a harbinger of peace

and luck. I wondered whether both had been broken from one little bough.

Such an immense calm was upon me that I took in every detail and beheld with eyes which missed nothing the majestic beauty of her face.

On it was the child look of wonder and of peace, the look of one to whom the Vision had come, without fear and without reproach.

She was safe—nay, more—she was happy; she had returned to the Heaven whence she had come, and with which she had never severed kinship or communion on earth, while I, who for all these years had been entrusted with her care, and had so basely betrayed that trust—God, where was I?

I do not know how long I stayed there, or what happened. I may have prayed, I may have been on my knees. I may have cried aloud to her — I do not know. But in the dusky heat of the afternoon I found myself miles from the house lying prone upon the heather, where I drew from my pocket the accursed thing that had killed her. It was part of my punishment that I had to read it through, that I had to discover how it had come to that remote place. It was all capable of the simplest explanation, as are most of the happenings of life. There is very little mystery, after all, in our scheme of things; each step of the way depends for surety or the reverse upon the one which went before; each issue marches to its logical and inevitable conclusion. The letter was written from the Hôtel Continental at Paris, where Maud had found a woman friend.

Surmising that I had gone to St. Jacques, she had addressed me there. To prevent confusion, Hester had left instructions with the nuns to forward anything that might come for her direct to Glen Isla. Either they had not troubled to discern between husband and wife, or had thought it was of no consequence; anyhow, the letter intended solely and privately for me had been readdressed to Hester, who, doubtless, overpowered by her inward fears, had opened it.

That was all. A few lines of that letter were enough to confirm her worst fears, to convince her beyond doubt that Maud Lacy and I were far more to one another than we had any right to be. It was a love-letter in the most hateful sense, and a proprietary letter as well, such as no wife could read and preserve her faith in her husband. I ground my teeth as I glanced rapidly over the contents, torturing myself with imagining how the words would burn upon my wife's brain and heart. There were allusions to her in it, the pitying, half-contemptuous phrases with which a bad woman can write of the good one she has supplanted.

In a fit of rage and fury, I tore it into a thousand pieces, and scattered it to the four winds of heaven. But it did not ease my intolerable burden. I was a murderer in the eye of Heaven, if not of earth. In that white old house on the hillside there were at least two persons who did not and would not acquit me of my wife's death. They had to be faced again, for there were hideous details to be settled, a funeral

to be arranged and endured, all the myriad and awful accompaniments of death to be faced and overcome. I picked myself up, and, standing for a few brief moments in that utter loneliness, with the cry of the curlew and the crooning song of the moorland burning in my ears, faced the awful thing that had overtaken me. In it I saw the hand of God, the great Judge and Avenger, and I knew that my lifelong punishment had begun. Nothing that human beings could do to me could equal or touch the cankerworm which must now prey upon my vitals to the very end of my life.

I was ready for them; they could do their worst. I made my way with long, swinging strides toward the house, and Yuill met me at the open door. Whatever his inward estimate of me, and that undoubtedly was the lowest one man could entertain toward another, he would not forego altogether the duties of his house.

"You must come and get something to eat," he said, not kindly, but straightly and quietly. "Dinner is over, but there is something ready for you."

"I break no bread in this house," I answered him, man to man. "No, nor stop under its roof. I saw a little inn as I came up the glen. I will find a room there. But before I get my bag, perhaps you will be good enough to inform me what will be the best steps to take regarding the removal of—of my wife to London."

Yuill leaned against the lintel of the door and eyed me steadily.

"Your sister and I have decided to bury her here. If you step inside, Miss Trent will come to you and give her reasons. We decided that this morning before you came."

"She is mine," I answered hotly, "and I take her where I will."

But Jane, who had been on the watch for me all day long, joined us at the moment, and I gathered from the expression of her face that her will would prevail against mine. "We shall not let you take her away," she answered clearly. "We and we alone have the right to her now. But I will tell you why we have decided to lay her in Glen Isla, though, remember, I recognize no right of yours to be told. We went together driving one day to a little kirk on the other side of the hill, where there is a handful of graves. It is remote from everything but God. Her eyes were wet as she slipped about among the mounds, and as we turned to go she said to me: 'Jane, I want you to make me a promise here.'

"I asked her what it was, and she answered:

" 'Wherever I die, promise me you will bring me here to sleep. I love this place. It has lifted me up. God has come quite near to me here among these old hills, and I have neither fear nor sorrow any more in my heart.' "

Her voice broke upon the last words, and, turning abruptly, she left us. Yuill turned away, his big shoulders heaving, while I, feeling a worm in the dust, had no balm for my burning eyes.

I went into the house, took my bag, and strode

away down the white ribbon of the road to the inn, and I saw them no more till the day on which we laid her in the place which she had chosen. There was much pity expressed for me by those who knew nothing beyond the fact of my wife's sudden death. I do not know how I comported myself among the interested strangers watching me. I only know that the day was got through, and that from the churchyard gate I drove straight to the train that was to bear me away to the hell waiting for me. I was glad to get away. Some day, I told myself, when my heart and life should be purged, some magnet, some cord from out eternity, might draw me once more to that little green enclosure in the lap of the hills, but that must be a long way off. Meanwhile I had to find myself, to get in grips with the thing that had actually overtaken my heart and life. Naturally a kindly person, my torment was now intensified by the memory of my own thoughtless cruelty spread over a long period of years. I had been cruel to the being I loved best on earth, and now she was beyond reach either of my cruelty or my atonement. I arrived at King's Cross at half-past six on Saturday night, and at once drove out to Finchley to the home which would never more be brightened by her presence. My one desire was to get there, to shut the door upon myself within its walls, and there indulge my grief, my impotent woe. There I could be alone, if not with her, at least with my memory of her. I cannot write of that night. The marvel was that the morning found me sane

and alive. More than once, in the silent night-watches, the devil was at my elbow, whispering to me of the quickest and the easiest way out. But always something held me back, an unseen force, which kept me from the coward's grave.

Toward the morning a little sleep came to me, and after breakfast I was able to speak to Mrs. Rickett, the gardener's wife, who had been caretaking in our absence; all the servants having gone for their holidays. Oddly enough, it had never occurred to me, when in Glen Isla, that there was anybody in London sufficiently interested to be told. No notice had appeared in the London papers. My wife was an obscure person, I thought, known to very few, and her death would not seriously affect a wide circle, but in this, as in many other premises regarding her, I found myself entirely at fault.

When I told Mrs. Rickett, she looked at me with unbelieving eyes.

"The missus dead and buried—oh, sir, it can't be true!" she wailed, and wrung her hands like a person distraught, as, indeed, she was.

I put the few particulars in her possession, and left her to tell Rickett, and from that hour he was a changed man. They had both loved her with a love which found its chief expression in most loyal and willing service. Before that ghastly Sunday was over, I regretted that I had parted with my painful secret so soon. Mrs. Rickett managed somehow to get news of the event to St. Luke's Church, and in the afternoon, as I sat on a chair in the veranda,

the Jermyns suddenly came in at the gate. I rose a little wildly, looking round for some means of escape, but none offered. I gripped the back of my chair and stood up, nerving myself for the ordeal at hand. After all, I told myself, I had to begin somewhere. If life were to be lived at all, I had to face the world. Something more than sympathetic concern sat on their faces; there was the genuine sorrow of those who feel themselves personally bereft.

"Can it be true what we have heard through our cook this morning, Mr. Trent? Has our dear and precious friend really left us?" said Jermyn, striving to steady his voice, which betrayed his genuine feeling. His wife was frankly in tears.

"My wife is dead," I answered, speaking in a dull, straight voice like some schoolboy reeling off his task. "It was quite sudden; a heart failure. We buried her in Glen Isla; that is all——"

I don't know how it struck them; they looked at me oddly, and there was a moment's tense silence. Obviously the rector felt himself at a loss, and realized that the commonplace expressions of sympathy or of religious condolence would in this case be wholly out of place. We were not intimate. Of late years, indeed, it had fallen out that we had met but seldom.

"It is an irreparable loss to us, to this parish, to the whole neighborhood," he said at length. "In fact, it is a loss which will never be fully realized by any of us. She was unique, noble, as nearly perfect

as a human being can be. Sir, I am unable to offer any kind of condolence to you."

"I want none," I answered thickly. "Please go away and leave me alone."

It was then that the woman's heart was touched, and, looking at me with much kindliness, Mrs. Jermyn tried to say that which would most comfort me. In her ignorance she made choice of a whip of scorpions.

"It is all too terrible and too sad, but at least we have had her, Mr. Trent. Our life would have been so much the poorer if we had never known her. When we feel like that, what must it be to you? I pray that God will bind up your broken heart, and somehow fill the home empty of her presence."

They went away with that, and I was powerless to utter another word. I heard afterwards that they had been much impressed with the vastness and the dignity of my unutterable grief, and that I had risen thereby in their estimation. The idea made me smile, when I could smile again, because it once more demonstrated the colossal ignorance in which we human beings live in relation to one another, and how futile are most of our attempts at complete understanding.

Next day I went blindly down to the city, where the news was not known yet, and the day passed better for me than I expected. And so for several days until the one dawned which brought me face to face with Maud Lacy once more. When she was shown into my room, such a whirlwind arose in my

bosom that everything swam before my eyes, and I was not for the moment master of myself. She brought with her a whiff of her own subtle scent, and was altogether an attractive vision in her summer attire, as her silken skirts made swish through the doorway. When she spoke, her voice had the airy ring of perfect ignorance or indifference, or both.

"So you *are* back!" she cried. "I only got back from Switzerland last night, and came in on the off-chance to-day just to ask whether you think you have treated me well. But, Heavens, what is the matter with you? Why do you look at me like that?"

There was sudden apprehension in her voice, and she put up her hand and pushed back the white veil which had always been a distinctive feature of her attire. I walked to the door to make sure of its fastening, put my back against it, and answered her.

"My wife is dead and buried in Scotland, and we have killed her."

I had no wish but to take my full share of the blame, but I felt an unholy joy to see the fine, high color recede from her cheek.

She lost her proud carriage, too, in that awful moment, and sank into the nearest chair.

"Gilbert!" she said in a shaking whisper. "You don't mean that she—that she——"

"She didn't commit suicide, if it is that you mean, only God was merciful and took her. It was your letter which did it, your damnable letter. In God's name, if you had to write it, why didn't you take care that it reached its proper destination?"

"Then she got it, opened it! I am sorry, Gilbert. Oh, I wish I was dead too!"

I believe she meant it at the moment. She made a spectacle of humiliation and horror as pitiable as mine.

I stood glaring at her, not sorry for her suffering—nay, glad of it. It was fitting and just that she, too, should pay some part of the price.

"I'm trying to remember what was in that letter," she said at last. "I just rattled it off one wet night at the Continental when I was feeling hipped because you had gone off as you did, and had never sent me a line. You don't happen to have it on you?"

"No," I answered, "I haven't."

There was a spell of dreary silence.

"Don't stand there like an image and glare at me like that, Gilbert Trent!" she cried pettishly at last. "After all, it wasn't all my fault. You were always willing enough. But what I want to know is, why she should have taken it like that? To die over one man—more or less. Heavens, you weren't worth it. No man is! Laugh at them, fool them, get what you can out of them—but die for them—it's, it's ineffable!"

Still I did not speak, for I think I felt at the moment that the room was too narrow for her and me. How strange it was! Outside, the hum and roar of the street traffic, while London hurried about its business; inside the building, all the orderly machinery of business life; while within the room

where we stood it was narrowed down once more to the primal issue presented first in Eden.

"You're not very enlightening," she said as her nervous fingers began to fumble with the fastenings of her veil in a vain attempt to replace it as before. "I have the right to know. Please answer me these questions, and then I'll go. How did it happen that she got the letter? Don't you take any better care of your private correspondence than that? I didn't take you for quite a fool, Gilbert."

"We had left St. Jacques. It was sent on to Scotland after her. They thought I was there too, I suppose. She, having her own suspicions, for it appears to me that she had known more than we think, opened it."

"And—and—did anybody else see it?" she asked feverishly, the instinct of self-preservation asserting itself.

"Jane read it, and has not spoken to me since."

"And these other people she was with, the Yuills?"

"I don't know how much Yuill knows. He, too, has suspected since the day we lunched together at the Great Eastern."

"Was there an inquest and all the usual fuss? What did you say there? It must have been horrible for you."

"There are no inquests in Scotland."

"The best thing I've ever heard about the beastly country," she said with perfect sincerity. "And you buried her there? Where's Jane?"

"Still with the Yuills."

"But I suppose she'll come back to you and keep house, and it will all be as before. Heavens, what a queer thing is life!"

"She'll never come back. She's put me outside the pale," I answered, and began to unlock the door. She stood a moment irresolute in the middle of the room. She had received an undoubted shock, but it was not in her nature to suffer anything to overmaster her.

"It's horrible! I'm sorry. I'd—I'd have left her alone if I'd had any idea she was like that, or—or so bound up in you. As I said before, you're not worth it, Gilbert—no man is. I'm dead sick of everything, and I've a very good mind to go back to Russia. There's somebody there who would be rather glad to see me. But I won't desert you, Gilbert. We ought to suffer together."

I opened the door and stood aside for her to pass out. I was incapable of speech at the moment, because if I had once opened the flood-gates I knew I should become an irresponsible being. It was better to part in silence. She offered her hand, but I could not touch it. Looking at me strangely, as one might intently study some familiar thing that suddenly presents a new front, Maud Lacy passed out of my room and my life forever.

CHAPTER XV

When I reached home that evening I found on the hall table a copy of the local paper, published at the end of each week. Something made me open it out at once, and the first thing that met my eye was the heading, "The late Mrs. Trent of Grey Gables. An appreciation. By one who knew her." I dropped down on the hall seat and began to read. It was a long article in close type, extending to a column and a half, and had evidently been written by one who had had an intimate acquaintance with Hester. It was most beautifully expressed, but the thing that amazed me most was the amount of information regarding my wife which was entirely new to me. I marvelled as I read, not at the tale of her endearing qualities, which had never been hidden from me, but at the number and nature of her activities in the place. I now learned for the first time how she had spent herself, and been spent for the community in which she lived. I had understood vaguely that she was interested in all good works, and had carried a good many of them through, but now the sum of her actual labors was set before me in clear print, an astounding record, as well as a complete revelation of a life whose outer fringes I had merely touched.

The article dealt first with her work at the women's meeting connected with St. Luke's, and which was held every Monday afternoon. About two years after we came to Finchley, Hester, after much urging from Mrs. Jermyn, who was out of health, had undertaken its sole conduct. She had asked my advice before she accepted, but I, not being interested in that class of occupation, had treated it with my usual flippancy.

"If you wouldn't find it a beastly fag, do it by all means. Only don't let them wear you out, old woman. The church crowd is notoriously the most ungrateful on earth."

I read how the thing had grown and flourished under Hester's fostering care, how the accommodation of the parish room had become inadequate, and a larger hall had to be found, how precious that Monday hour had become to the women not only of St. Luke's, but of a far wider constituency. And it was primarily for Hester they came. I stared stupidly at the words. "The whole explanation of the movement which has done so much to lift up the working womanhood of our town and district, is that Mrs. Trent gave herself. These words might be written in letters of gold above every action of her life: 'She gave herself.'" It went on to tell of her sympathy, her practical help, her spiritual insight into the needs and sorrows of others, her untiring devotion and cheerfulness, and her sweet humility. "She was so approachable, no one feared to go to her with their story, either of sin or distress. Literally

following in the footsteps of the Master she served, she did what she could. The loss to us is irreparable. A movement is on foot to make some memorial of this beloved woman who has been a succorer of many."

I was still staring stupidly at these words, marvelling that the outside world should have been capable of such appreciation, when a shadow fell across the tiles of the open porch. A young man stood there, looking eagerly, almost imploringly, into the house. When I rose and spoke to him, inquiring his business, his distress seemed to increase. He hurriedly drew from his pocket a copy of the very paper I was reading.

"Oh, sir, is this true? Is Mrs. Trent really dead? I had not heard. I can't believe it! She was the best friend I had in the world."

I asked him to come in. I took him to the library and begged him to tell his story. He did. It was a common one of weakness and easy stumbling on the downward way. Hester had come across him, had helped him with money, and with advice; in a word, had lifted him from the slough of despond and set him in a safe place. As I listened, the wonder and the bitterness grew in my heart because she had been able to save all but me. I found myself taking a new rôle that night, the rôle of sympathizer and helper. This poor lad must have some one to step into the breach; perhaps this was the work which Hester had left for me to do. I had no right to advise or judge a man in such trouble, because I had fallen so far

short, yet I had such understanding of his case, that I was able to send him comforted upon his way. This gave me a sense of nearness to her, and for the first time a light seemed to shine across the awful dreariness of my path. As I went slowly upstairs after he had gone, I thought of all the evidences that had been marshalled before me in the last days. Not one had passed without its toll of tribute to her memory.

All sorts and conditions of men and women had spoken to me, and I found myself the object of a peculiar and respectful sympathy which had almost unmanned me. They argued from the premises that if they missed her so much, what must her loss mean to me? For the first time I took courage to enter the place of sacred and most poignant memory, the first-floor room which had been Hester's shrine. It was as she had left it, all orderly and sweet, but it struck me with a sort of chill. Since my home-coming I had occupied one of the guest rooms at the farther end of the passage, and had not so much as opened this door. I entered by way of the dressing room, and closed the communicating door. Restfulness was the note struck by that wide, low chamber, restfulness and purity. A carpet of French gray was on the floor, and the hangings were gray, with a border of worked roses at the hem. I remembered how many days Hester had sat over them, getting all the shades to tone, and how pleased she had been with the effect when all was finished. She had called me in to inspect and criticize, and I think I had said it lacked a dash of color.

The only note of contrast was struck by the deep pink frieze against the ceiling. There was not much furniture and no heavy wardrobe, for Hester made a wardrobe room in one of the attics. As she used this one often as a boudoir, she had utilized the wall space where a wardrobe might have stood by placing against it an old Dutch bureau which together we had bought in an antique shop in Harwich. It was locked now, but her keys were in my pocket. She had left them in her basket downstairs, but had not troubled to write about them, evidently assured that no one would intrude upon her private papers.

Until now, I had had no wish to do so. I approached the desk, fitted the old brass key in it, and pulled down the flap. In the pigeon holes all the household and personal accounts were neatly docketed, while in one of the deep drawers were some letters tied with pink ribbon. My face flushed as I saw that they were my own, all the happy nonsense I had penned to her during the brief term of our engagement. Every one, even the smallest note, was there.

I could not have laid hands on one of hers now to save my life. I was not the kind of man to cherish such souvenirs. My material soul was all for destroying the things that were done with, and it was one of my favorite axioms that old letters are merely so much lumber, which ought to be destroyed ruthlessly before they make confusion in more senses than one. Hester had never refuted such vandal statement, doubtless her answer had been a little

far-away smile. In her own place she could do as she liked, and nobody had the right to forbid her her secret treasures. Three drawers were below the flap; the upper one was locked.

When I opened and drew it out, I was surprised to find there several writing-pads piled one on another. I had often seen her using such a pad, sometimes on her knee, sometimes at the desk, and had twitted her about her rivalry of Jane, who had made some success with fugitive articles, and was even then engaged in a more ambitious effort. I lifted up one and found that it was filled from end to end with Hester's neat, easily read handwriting, each page numbered, and some of them dated. Further inspection informed me that it was my wife's private diary, kept faithfully from the time of her marriage. It gave me a strange thrill of fear, and I hastened to close the drawer and turn the key. That record, if it were faithfully set down, must contain a circumstantial and colossal indictment of myself. I made up my mind, as I hastened from the desk, that I would never read it, that I would take my courage in both hands one day, and burn it in a fire which would consume every letter and page of it. Yet all the while I knew myself consumed with a fierce desire to take it out and discover my wife's estimate of me, her version of our dual life.

Before I left the room I looked at other things, at the little spindle-legged table by the bed on which stood the slide containing what Hester called her "bedside books." They were chiefly religious. The

Bible, an old ivory Prayer Book her mother had carried on her marriage day, a morocco copy of à Kempis (a thing I had always hated and shrunk from, and regarding which Hester and I had had some heated arguments), one or two favorite novels, and some volumes of poetry, about a dozen together, all beloved and marked in places because they had helped to build up the inner life to which I had been such a total stranger, but to which I now had the key.

In the night watches, when I awoke, as I often did at that time, with a start of horror, realizing what had befallen me, I felt myself drawing nearer and nearer to the old Dutch bureau, I saw myself with the writing-pads in front, devouring the contents. And when I awoke there was no escape. Next day was Sunday, and it rained. Behold me, then, about ten o'clock in the morning, carrying my wife's tablets down to my own den, and laying them on my desk. Then I lit my pipe and sat down resolutely. I told myself I would merely dip into the pages, that it was necessary I should do so in case they might contain some instruction or some guidance for my future behavior, or even some behest it would be my sacred duty to fulfill.

But all the time at the back of my mind, remote from all these specious excuses I made to myself, there was the one fierce and overmastering desire: to learn what Hester had really felt and thought and suffered during the years we had been together.

The diary began with the date, November, 1897,

immediately after our marriage. It was dated from the Bank House, Finchley, and must have been begun when we returned from our honeymoon. Without further preamble, I present the untouched, unedited record of my wife's hidden life.

"I have always wished and intended to keep a proper journal, merely for my own use and instruction as I went through life, but somehow until now there seemed nothing to record in it except trivial happenings and vague desires and hopes and thoughts. All these have suddenly crystallized into a glorious reality, and I must perpetuate it, lest it should by some unexpected turn of events be snatched from me. At La Grenade the days, though happy, seem now in comparison purposeless. I had my niche to fill there, and my old dears have assured me that I filled it well.

"But a subordinate place in a boarding school, even where one is fairly happy and completely trusted, cannot be set down as a full destiny for a woman in whose heart God has implanted every womanly instinct.

"In the year before I met Gilbert I was conscious of an oddly growing unrest of soul. Sometimes I used to ask myself whether I should have to go on living at La Grenade, teaching fresh girls until I was quite an old, gray-haired woman. I loved the girls, but sometimes my spirit quailed a little at the prospect of having to pilot other people's children through these few unimportant years of their lives.

"And all the time God was preparing a splendid destiny for me, getting me ready by the way of patience and discipline to make a home.

"And now I am in it, and I am so happy I want all the world to know it. Perhaps it is because I have had such a lonely life. Since fifteen I have had no home. I have no people, and that is always very sad for a woman. For a man, perhaps, it does not so much matter, though I think, from what I have observed, that those who are brought up in large families have the best chance of happiness.

"It is not possible for them, in all the happy camaraderie of family life, to become either selfish, morbid, or introspective. I was very pleased when it was decided that I was to take Florrie and Bertha Lacy to England, and I was quite conscious of a happy thrill of inward excitement.

"Something told me it was going to be an eventful journey for me, personally, and, indeed, it proved so, changing my entire life.

"I wonder may I whisper here on this page, which nobody but myself shall ever read, that the only flaw in my happiness is the knowledge that it was at the Lacys' house where I met my husband first.

"I was not long with them, but there was something there which hurt me. I am afraid to set it down here; it will seem so wicked and ungrateful after all the joy that has come to me through it. But I was glad to get away from Helston, and I am

profoundly thankful that it was quickly settled that we should not live there.

"Here Gilbert and I are quite alone, and surely it will be my fault if the home is not all it ought to be. He is so kind and dear, so big and strong and tender. I am never done marvelling that he should have found anything to care for in me. And he is so clever, too, with a quick, relentless kind of cleverness which I am sometimes just a tiny mite afraid of. He knows so much about people and about things, and can dissect motives in a moment.

"Just once or twice I have felt that it is rather nice not to be clever, and to believe more easily in people. I like nearly everybody, only with a very few people I feel such a shrinking of spirit, that I never want to meet them or see them or come into contact with them. I am very sorry that I should feel so about some of Gilbert's friends, especially those he is very intimate with and cares most about.

"I am afraid of Maud Lacy, for sometimes she is not quite kind in the things she says about people. I am afraid, too, that she does not always take the trouble to be accurate. Gilbert teases me sometimes about being what he calls 'school-marmy,' and that I must begin presently to take broader views of life, but I should be terrified to feel about people and things as Miss Lacy does. It would make me so unhappy and ashamed.

"I have many things to thank my dear husband for, but most of all I think I love him for giving me a real sister in Jane.

"They are so different, only a little alike when they smile. Both have such a beautiful smile, so ready and sunny. Yet when he is serious, Gilbert can look very stern, and I think in business I should fear him rather. Perhaps it is because I know so little about men that I say this. I am struck dumb by the power they have, and how they can make or mar the whole of life for a woman. I am sure I could never be quite as much to Gilbert as he is to me. He has so many interests; I have only him.

"But that is as it should be, I am sure, and I pray God that he may never find me wanting.

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"It has been such fun and so intensely interesting furnishing our dear little house. I am sure that people who can simply go to a shop and order anything they fancy miss a great deal of joy. We have to count up how much we can afford to give for each article. Even when we have to go without, we tell one another it is only a pleasure deferred. What a dear, big child Gilbert is in such matters! Sometimes I feel so much older, almost as if I had lived before. Already I find two distinct personalities in him. In business he is rather terrible, so keen and hard, and so amazingly clever. That is the Monsieur of whom Babette stands so obviously in awe. She simply shakes in her sabots when he rings the bell. 'Monsieur ees so big an *tres* terrible. 'E spik so loud!'

"And yet his heart is so tender, he could not hurt a fly. I wonder whether Babette and he will ever

understand one another. Just at present it seems rather hopeless. I wonder why Englishmen, when they cannot make themselves understood in a foreign tongue, go on shouting louder and louder.

"That is what terrifies Babette. The other morning Gilbert wanted his boots very quickly, not the pair she had brought, but another, and the confusion was hopeless. Finally, when Babette was on the point of tears, Gilbert burst out laughing, and she retired completely mystified. She confided to me afterwards that she was quite certain the moment had come when Monsieur had determined to cut off her head. To me she is the greatest possible comfort. Such devotion and such capability do not, I think, go often hand in hand, especially in England. In some respects England seems to me rather crude, and the life of the suburbs is not as yet dignified. People are everywhere making something— houses, businesses, churches. Perhaps also they are making themselves in the process. It is interesting to watch. Sometimes I wish it had not been our lot to establish something, that so much did not depend on Gilbert making much business at the new bank. One has to push so hard for that, and not to be scrupulous. My husband is born for something better, I feel sure.

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"I can well see how lonely it is possible to be in a place like this. There is no precedent, no established order of things, nobody to lead. People do not call on one another, however kindly they may feel,

because they do not know whether their neighbors wish to know them, or whether even they will be desirable friends. It is hard to undo acquaintances after they are made, therefore people have to be careful. But the outcome of it all is much loneliness for those who are fond of society. We have not had any callers yet, though I meet people outside, and in the shops, where I go to buy what I require, who look very nice. Sometimes I speak to them, and then they are so pleasant. Everything seems complicated here in England. The machinery of life is cumbersome. I have lived so long abroad, I can see where both the French and the Belgians have the advantage of us. They are simpler, they are content with less, ask not so much from life. It is all intensely interesting. I can never be dull here; there is so much to think about and to study.

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"We have had much joy in our first visit from my father-in-law and Jane. They came for the week-end just after we came home. I love Jane so much. She has been like a mother to these two big children, but they don't know it. They speak of her kindly, but with much condescension, and take everything for granted where she is concerned. Laughing very much, she said to me one day that she was not sure whether even they conceded her a soul. It is amazing that they can have lived so long beside her, without discerning what a great soul she has. I have never met any one quite like her, and her knowledge of human nature is uncanny. She simply looks

at a person, and knows him or her through and through.

"'It is men who carry on the work of the world,' she said to me one day, 'but it is women who keep it green. Conceive of a world peopled by men! You know what happens to them in mining camps, in barracks, in places where they are herded together without us. They lose all that is worth preserving. I don't want to do a man's work; I can't think why any woman should. It is so infinitely less than ours, when its whole sum is told. We have to keep alive the spark of divine fire. Most of us do it badly, but without us there would be nothing but black darkness. I'm quite content to be a woman——'

"That is the sort of talk which makes one think. All the time I want to know more and more what is inside of Jane. As this is my quite private record for my eye alone, I may set down what she said to me personally when she was getting ready to go away.

"'I don't pray very much, Hester, but every day I thank God for giving you to Gilbert. He was what you needed, and you did not come into his life a moment too soon. I don't say he has deserved you, mind, but I'm glad he has got you. That alone has evened up, for me, a little of the injustice of life.' Even yet I don't quite grasp all she meant. Perhaps I shall understand better later on, but I thank God for Jane. She is so true and brave and fine. I am so thankful she cares for me.

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"I love to watch Gilbert and his father together,

and their fine courtesy to one another. Gilbert says 'sir' to him, as if he were his superior officer. Gilbert has told me what his father said to him once when speaking about his wife. He explained that by her death the mainspring of his life was broken. That seems to explain all that needs explanation in his life, his apparent godlessness and indifference, the strange, bitter way he has of looking at things. I wish I had known Gilbert's mother; she would have helped me so much to understand him. Mr. Trent is most kind to me. When he went away he kissed me, and said, looking at me in the eyes:

"'My dear, I've seen your home. I wanted to see it. Probably I shall never come to it again. I'm an old man, and I don't pay visits in other people's houses. I go back more than satisfied Gilbert has done well for himself. His marriage with you is the wisest thing he has ever accomplished in his whole life. Keep the rein tight. It's what we all need. And so long as that soft, steady light burns for him in your eyes, both he and you will be right. Goodbye. Come to Helston and see the old man who wishes you well.'

"Somehow my eyes filled with foolish tears at these words. There was such finality about them. I wish they said more about Gilbert, and less about me. They speak as if I had some great responsibility. I am not cut out for responsibility. I have moved in such a narrow groove."

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My reading was interrupted at the moment by the

sound of wheels on the gravel outside, some vehicle coming up the approach to the house. I sprang up and hastened to the window and beheld a station fly with luggage on the top. Immediately thereafter Jane alighted from it. I was struck dumb, and did not know what to do. Somehow I thought our parting at Glen Isla had been final, and though I was of course aware that she could not remain permanently with the Yuills, I had not troubled myself about her future movements. I had now been home ten days, and no communication had passed between us since. Some instinct made me hide all the tablets in a drawer, which I locked, putting the key in my pocket; then I proceeded gloomily and apprehensively downstairs. Jane was now in the hall, directing Rickett what to do with her baggage. When she saw me she came forward, holding out her hand.

"How do you do, Gilbert?" she said in her ordinary voice. "I was not sure whether I should find you here. The Yuills had other guests, and it was time for me to come home."

I stared at her stupidly, and we walked together into the dining room.

CHAPTER XVI

As we faced one another in the cool, soft light of the room which Hester had taken such pride in, I thought Jane's look was kindly, though remote.

I wanted to say a number of things, but my lips refused to move.

She spoke first. "I have come back, Gilbert, to see whether I can be of any use to you in rearranging your life. I have come at Hester's bidding."

Her voice was quite quiet and assured, and I could only wait until she chose to explain her strange words.

"When we parted that day we buried her, I did not think I should ever wish to see you again. I was stunned, horrified, overwhelmed. I could hardly even think. Then it was borne in on me that I had to find some place for myself, that I could not quarter myself much longer on the Yuills. It was all very dark and dreary, and I did not know what to do."

"Well, then, and who advised you to come back?" I asked in a voice that had small resemblance to my usual arbitrary tones.

"I am coming to that. I asked for guidance, as I have always done all through my life, and it came,

but not in the way I expected. May I sit down, Gilbert?—I am feeling very tired."

I hastened to set a chair for her, and she drew off her gloves, took the pins from her black hat, and laid it on the table. I noticed the smooth braiding of her hair, its exquisite neatness, and at the same time the breadth and nobility of her forehead. She was in her own way a beautiful woman.

"Won't you sit down too, Gilbert? for the thing I am going to tell you will take a little time. I don't expect that you will believe it, but that it all happened I am as certain as I am before you now."

My eyes must have glowed with eagerness, but my heart beat with a strange suffocation; I felt that I was about to hear something strange, perhaps even terrible. But now nothing could surprise me. I was even prepared to hear that Hester was not dead at all, so unreal was the whole world in which I lived. Presently she began again.

"After everything was over, and you had gone, I asked Christina whether she would mind if I had the room where Hester had been, and where you saw her. I had the feeling that somehow it might bring her nearer to me. I felt as if there was nothing at all left in the wide world when we came away from the old kirkyard that day and left her to her rest. She had no objection; she even liked the idea, and that night we stopped a long time together in the room talking about her. I will tell you here, Gilbert, that Miss Yuill does not know the whole story. Even Andrew, I think, does not, though he knows a part."

She said this, I thought, to comfort me, and once more her eyes rested on my face with something of the old kindliness of expression.

"When you went away, Gilbert, I never wanted to see you again. I hated you so much that in heart I was almost, if not quite, a murderer. It was wrong. God showed me it was quite wrong. That is why I am here."

She seemed garrulous and discursive, I thought, taking a long time to get to the point of her story, if she had one to tell.

"I was telling you how I came to occupy her room, and the second night I was there, in the middle of the night I woke up quite suddenly with a start, certain some one was there. It was Hester. I saw her as plainly as I see you now."

"It's impossible!" I said thickly. "Such things do not happen."

"They do to some people. I have seen father twice, Gilbert, since he went away, only it was no use talking about it. This is different. Hester's return concerns you, and I had no choice but to come back to London to tell you."

She babbled on, apparently quite unconscious of the torture to which she was subjecting me. "I sat up, stretching out my hands joyfully, not in the least afraid, Gilbert. She looked so sweet and so happy. There was a light on her face which belongs to the other side. She did not speak, and when I cried out her name she pointed upward, and with a smile seemed to fade away. I sat up a long time, hoping

the vision would come again, but it did not. I had no fear. I fell asleep after a time, and had the best sleep I had had since she died. Next day I told Christina. She was not in the least surprised. They believe in the second sight in Glen Isla, and she says there are some to whom the spirits appear with a message. We talked a good deal that day about what I should do with my life, and we agreed that perhaps if Mr. Yuill could spare her, we might go together abroad to Florence or to Rome for the winter. That night Hester came again. She stayed longer, and she spoke just once in her own quiet voice, so naturally, as if she were in the flesh.

"All she said was, 'Go back to Gilbert; he needs you; go now.'"

Jane stopped there and looked at me strangely and keenly.

"I can't believe it, Jane," I stammered. "If such things were possible, surely she would have appeared to me."

"Perhaps she may come one day; you see, I have never been detached from her in spirit. Since the moment we first met, our hearts clave to one another, and we have never had the slightest misunderstanding. Anyhow, I am here. Shall I stay? Have you made any plans? Can I be of any use?"

"I have no plans. I never shall have any," I answered recklessly. "You can stay if you like, but I have nothing to offer you in the way of a home, except these walls. I can promise nothing,

for I don't know what a day will bring forth."

"I shall stay. We shall learn from day to day how to go," she said simply. "There are only you and I left, Gilbert, and she loved us both."

I was unable to answer her, for again it was as if something snapped in me. I fled from her presence and shut myself up once more to ponder on the strange message my sister had brought. Never was there a saner, more practical, less morbid person in the world than Jane, and that she absolutely believed what had happened in the old white house of Brean was evident. It had wrought such a change in her front toward me that she had come of her own free will to offer me her help and sisterly comradeship. Of herself she could not have done it, for her whole being had risen in conflict and rebellion against me, and she had not wished to see my face again. To find some relief from the whirl of my thoughts, I turned once more to the leaves of the journal, and was presently so completely absorbed that I forgot my sister was in the house.

It began again under the date 10th December.

"Something new and delightful has happened to me. I have made a friend. It is such a rare thing in this world, that it is worth setting down. For two Sundays we had attended St. Luke's Church, and we both liked the service and the preaching of the rector, Mr. Jermyn. I had already heard from various sources, but more especially from my little woman in the newspaper shop on the Parade, how much they

are beloved in Finchley, and what good they do. To-day they came to call on us. They are quite lovely people, the sort you know at once and with whom you feel at home. Mrs. Jermyn is a soldier's daughter, like me, and was born in India too. I suppose that made a sort of bond to begin with. I think Gilbert liked them, but sometimes I wonder whether he is really shy at bottom. Certainly he did not show up at his best, and I wanted him to so very much. When one is very proud of one's husband, and thinks the world of him, of course she wants that opinion both confirmed and shared. It has been such a misfortune for Gilbert to have had no church life at his own home. Nothing can ever quite make up for that. He talks of the church-going habit as he might talk of the golf habit or the walking habit, just a thing one takes up or not as it happens. This strikes me as very strange and rather awful. Yet I don't say anything. Why is it, I wonder, that we babble so incessantly about things that are of little account in comparison, and keep silent altogether about what really matters? People are so busy living here, they have no time to think or speak of the life that is beyond. It has as yet no place at all, so far as I can see, in Gilbert's thoughts. But to me it is all quite real and precious. I wonder whether he will care after a while, and be interested, or whether I shall come round to his way of thinking, and go with him perhaps to the golf course on Sunday morning, instead of to church?

"We have also got to know some delightful Scotch

people who live in Totteridge Lane. Their name is Yuill, a brother and sister, middle-aged, well-to-do, altogether delightful. Mr. Yuill is a jute merchant, but is also on the Stock Exchange, where Gilbert says he has been very successful. I am so glad that Gilbert likes them. He plays golf with Mr. Yuill, but it makes him very despondent because the Scotchman is so much better at the game. The brother and sister are very happy together, and there is a sort of dry humor between them which often makes us laugh. When he wants to tease her very much he calls her Teen, but her real name is Christina, and she is really very dignified. But she has the kindest heart, and there isn't anything about housekeeping she does not know. She tells me all sorts of out-of-the-way bits of household lore. I write them down in a book, and will try to teach Babette.

"Every country has its own way in domestic affairs, and from each one can learn something. Miss Yuill speaks about foreign housekeeping as a 'clanjamphry.' I have asked her to spell it for me, and to explain it. She laughed very much, and said it meant 'mixter-maxter,' which did not enlighten me in the least. Then Andrew laughed very much, and told her to leave off tormenting the bairn. From that it is easy to see how intimate we have become quickly. I had always heard that Scotch people are difficult to know, and that they stick out all round like their own thistles, and jag every time you pass them. It isn't true—not a single word of it. And they are full of the most delightful dry kind of humor.

Mr. Yuill says that the Scotch are not only the most humorous nation in the world, but the only one. I am so glad we know them. Life gets more interesting every day.

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"I have pledged myself to write down all the happenings of my life, big and small, pleasant and unpleasant, but hitherto I have had nothing but pleasant things to record. To-day I have something different to set down, and I have put it off longer than I ought. It is five days since I wrote anything here. We have had a visit from Maud Lacy. She arrived one afternoon without sending any notice, and of course I imagined that she had only come to call. I was alone in the house, and directly I saw her at the door I had the odd feeling that the house did not belong to me. I felt flurried in spirit, and it was quite a few minutes before I could compose myself to give her a welcome. Of course this was very foolish, and there was not the shadow of an excuse for it. I scolded myself well for it, and tried to be as friendly and natural as possible. She kissed me on both cheeks. I hated it mortally, and I'm afraid I must have shown it, though I tried not to. Then she began to talk immediately about our honeymoon, asked how I had enjoyed it, and how I liked Gilbert as a travelling companion.

"'You must not be jealous, Mrs. Gib,' she said with rather a loud laugh, which showed her dazzling white teeth. 'You see, he and I have been pals so

long, ever since we wore pinafores, that I can't relinquish him all at once. A ripping good sort is Gib, only you mustn't spoil him. He likes his own way—always did. Occasionally I used to put on the brake, and it was good for him. Don't be above taking a bit of advice from an old campaigner. I've had a lot of beaux in my time, and when you know how to manipulate one, you have 'em all.'

"I did not know what to say to this strange medley of speech. I thought it atrocious taste, of course, and most impertinent as well, to talk so to any woman about her husband. Then I tried to laugh and to assure myself that it was merely the Lacy point of view. I had carried away with me from my memorable visit to Helston a sense of their lack of reticence. Nobody was permitted sanctuary in their house; everything, even one's innermost feelings, seemed to be common property. It was like living in a Commune, and having all the barricades torn down and trampled on. But I felt myself shrink, and I am quite sure my expression must have been a little hostile. I rang the bank bell for Gilbert to come up; Babette had gone out for the day, and it was my birthday, and we were going into London to dine, and go to some place of entertainment as a birthday treat for me. I had been occupied all the afternoon in putting a white yoke in my evening frock, and I had a very smart hat. I like so much the foreign fashion of high frocks and pretty hats for restaurant wear. I don't think *decollete* is right in public places. When I heard Gilbert coming up

the stairs whistling, I got up quite suddenly and ran away to the kitchen, saying I must see about tea. It was quite cowardly, but somehow I could not bear the idea of seeing them meet. It was the most uncomfortable, desperate feeling I had ever had. Translated, it just meant that I did not want Maud Lacy to be in our house. I could have shown her out quite inhospitably and without a pang. I shut the kitchen door, and began to cut bread and butter with great haste, and even began to hum a little air so that I might not hear their voices. After a little time Gilbert came to me and was very sweet. But when he told me that we should have to take Miss Lacy with us to London, and that she wanted to stop all night, I could have cried. Gilbert saw, of course, how much I minded, and tried to comfort me. But at the same time I saw that he was determined that she should carry out her program. He said he owed it to her to show her every possible attention, because of all the kindness he had received at their house.

"'Very well,' I said. 'Of course, I will do my best.'

"And I honestly did; but it cost me a tremendous lot. My day that was going to be so happy was completely spoiled. The effect she had on me was to make me feel as if my house, my husband, and everything I possessed belonged to her, and I was a mere intruder, or chance occupant of the place.

"All at once another side of me I had not dreamed existed seemed to leap up to torture and defy me. I had no loving-kindness or charity or anything in my

heart, only a most unreasoning dislike against Maud Lacy.

"Nobody will ever know what I suffered that evening, nor how I felt when we had to come back with her to our house. She wanted to sit up talking to Gilbert about old times, and though I hated her mortally for it, I just left her and went away to bed. But I could not sleep. I cried out to God to forgive me for all the hard, wicked thoughts I had been cherishing, and to help me to be more charitable and kind. It was all no good. I was just wretched, and when Gilbert came I could hardly keep back my tears. I don't think he was very happy either. Something had crept in between us, a sort of deadly chill. I wanted to lock our door, and Gilbert did. Our privacy was destroyed. We felt almost as if we had no right to be together.

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"It took me several days to recover from Maud Lacy's visit, and somehow we did not talk about it at all after she had gone away. But I don't forget about her; she disturbs me far more than anybody imagines. I wonder why? How terrible if I were to degenerate into a jealous woman! Could anything be more degrading and appalling? I should never respect myself any more. We are very poor creatures after all, so much the sport of circumstance. And, above all, we never can be certain how we will comport ourselves in any given place. I must get more things to fill up my life. My house is not enough for me or for any woman. The groove is too

narrow; it tends to morbidity and introspection. It is absolutely necessary for the soul's welfare that one should touch life at many varying points.

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"I have had a long talk with Mrs. Jermyn, a delightful talk, and am greatly helped. I did not, of course, tell her anything about my private life, but she understands that I want to have something to do beyond taking care of my house; Babette is so efficient, and, all our things being new, and our *menage* so small, I could not possibly fill up all my time with it. She has given me a small district to visit, and has also asked me to help her with the Women's Meeting she holds in the parish room every Monday. I have never met anybody quite like her. She has lost three children, one a splendid boy, almost ready for college, and she has only one left, a little daughter, not strong. Yet she does not grumble or even question God's dealing with her. She just accepts it, and goes on adding to the sum of her work for others. It makes me feel awed and ashamed, and I realize that I have a trifling soul that cannot see beyond its own borders. I am sure I never should be able to give up precious things in a spirit like that. I should rebel and fight, and get bitter and cruel. I feel all these potentialities within me already. I suppose it means that I am beginning to live. Where the groove is very narrow there cannot, of course, be so much to fret the spirit, which then becomes trammelled. I don't want a trammelled spirit. Lord deliver me from it! I want it to

be wide and free, and full of love and light. I shall try to be more like Mrs. Jermyn. I have never seen anything more perfect than these two, the rector and his wife; theirs is an idyll of married life. Yet there is nothing namby-pamby about them; each has a virile personality, and on some points they agree to differ. But their union is perfect and complete. It is a union of the spirit, such as I have often dreamed about. They have one purpose, the advancement of Christ's kingdom on earth. These words will strike unreal, perhaps, and conjure up a picture of goody-goody people with long faces, wholly given up to church service and work, and with no time for anything else. The reality is so different. They are the happiest people I have ever met, they laugh a great deal, and every little bit of comedy appeals to them; their home is the most joyous place I have ever been in. It is what I should like mine to be. I wish I understood my husband's work better, and could share it. When he goes down to the bank and the door is shut, I feel that I have lost him, and that for the time being he has put me quite out of his life. It cannot be otherwise, of course, because he is engaged in purely commercial undertakings, in which a woman can't be of the slightest use to him. Sometimes men come in of an evening, Gilbert's friends, that he has met on the golf course or in business, and when I listen to them I wonder whether it is really as they say out in the world, every man's hand against another's, and all straining to get there first. When one tries to follow them,

a sort of sadness seems to settle on the spirit. According to them, hardly anybody is honest or sincere in business; each one has some axe to grind, some personal aim to serve. And he will serve it at whatever cost to others. When I asked Gilbert one day whether that was not a very low standard, he laughed very much.

"'Not at all, my dear,' he said, and patted my cheek as if I were a small child asking questions which the grown-up intellect hardly thought it worth while to answer. 'That's business, and I don't want you to worry your dear little head about it. A woman should be like a flower blooming for beauty and fragrance. Leave the sordid fight to those whose backs are made for the burden.'

"But no sane woman can be like that. If she has any brain or personality of her own, she must be interested in every problem. It is all rather puzzling, and I had no idea life could be so complicated and so difficult. I wish that Gilbert were more interested in the things that interest me. He likes the Jermyns quite well, but I can see that he is not quite at home with them. He says that because Mrs. Jermyn is an Honorable she puts on side; I have never seen it, and I don't quite know what it means. But Gilbert is not comfortable in their company, and one night they asked us to dine and meet some of St. Luke's people, he seemed awkward and silent. The Yuills were there, happily, so that he did not feel quite stranded. I played and sang for them, and everybody was quite kind about it. I believe I sang well,

for I was feeling happy and at home. When we left the Rectory, Gilbert began to chaff me at once rather unmercifully.

"'You had all your goods in the front window to-night with a vengeance, little woman. How is it you don't trot 'em out for yours truly, eh? I could do with a bit of music now and again.'

"'Oh, Gilbert, I thought it bored you. When I play Mendelssohn or Beethoven you invariably go to sleep.'

"'Well, isn't that what music's for, to soothe the savage breast?' he said gaily. 'I'm mighty glad that show's over, anyhow, and I hope they won't ask us back in a hurry.'

"I felt disappointed at these words, but, as is so often the case with me when I feel a thing rather keenly, I left off talking about it at once. After we got in the house I felt rather faint, and Gilbert insisted that I should have some champagne. He is so funny about champagne; he seems to regard it as a cure for everything. And he fussed over me such a lot, asking whether I had a pain at my heart, or what it was that made me go off as I had done several times lately, that at last I just took his dear old head in both my hands and whispered something in his ear.

"I can't write down what he said. It took me right back to that wonderful day at Terveuren, when I knew he loved me, and that I loved him.

"He looked so noble and so good, and all that was best in his fine manhood was written on his face.

Oh, I am sure Gilbert will make a splendid father, and God has been very, very good to me. I shall never have any hunger of the heart again. When I lay down in my bed, I asked God to remember all the women who loved little children, and wanted to mother them.

"In the middle of my prayer Gilbert came in and knelt down too.

"And that was the very happiest night of our marriage. I ask to be made worthier of it all. My heart is too full to write more."

CHAPTER XVII

"It seems a long, long time since I last wrote here. The actual time is fifteen weeks. I have been right down in the valley of the shadow, and all our hopes are gone. My little baby, for whom we had prepared the nest, did not so much as open his eyes on it. I was too ill to know what had happened; and I did not even see him before they took him away. Gilbert has told me he was a beautiful baby, and I can see that his disappointment is keen. Poor father, to be bereft of his first-born at the very moment of expectant joy! He has been very good about it; all his concern is for me. Sorrow is a wonderful thing; its ministry to the human heart is like no other on earth. We both try to hide from one another how much we feel, and to forget self even for a little while must be good.

"But do we ever really forget the insistent self which torments us, which makes such large demands on all our resources, which is so loath to forego its imagined rights?

"I look now with different eyes on the babies I see everywhere in the arms of their mothers, and with their nurses in the perambulators on the Parade. Some of them are lovely as a dream. In the suburbs,

where they are so busy making everything, the babies are wonderful. They seem to have the freshness of new places, full of hope, on their faces. I can hardly look at them now without a pang. I tell Gilbert when I see him despondent that God will give us other children, and that we shall always keep a place for our first-born who has gone to make Heaven real for us. When I talk like that, he rises up invariably and walks away. It is not the nature of men to endure patiently. They always want to be taking the active part, and when some force stronger than themselves ordains otherwise, they simply rebel. I don't love him the less for it, and I am glad that he feels it all so desperately.

"I had such kindness and care while I was ill, such a good doctor and a kind nurse, a motherly hearted, middle-aged person, who was always comforting. She went with me to Brighton for a few days; I was picking up so slowly that they seemed to get alarmed, and said I must have a change.

"Gilbert came down for the week-end and walked by my bath-chair on the front. It was very windy and boisterous, but the strong smell of the sea seemed to get into my veins, and I came home nearly quite well. It is just a little hard beginning again where I left off. I thought it would all be so different. I have not had the courage to look at the lovely outfit which I had got ready with such loving care for my little son, sewing my heart in with every stitch. Nurse had put them all away, and only Babette knows where they are. Babette has been splendid,

and she is so patient with the young girl we had got in to train so that she might help in the house while Babette took baby out. Poor Babette, she had got Mimi to buy her a very smart bonne's cap from the Avenue Louise in Brussels, so that she might strike awe into the nursemaids on the Parade when she walked out with her charge. That, too, is locked away. But, please God, it will see the light yet. Gilbert says I am to keep the young maid, and, indeed, I am glad, for I don't feel strong yet, and all the things I used to do so easily seem to tire me. Life is a little more serious than it was, that is all, but I think not less happy.

"I cannot help thinking this has all done Gilbert good, and made him more of a man, but, oh! I wish, I wish our little son was in his arms and on my heart! There he will always be nestling in his own place, which no other child will ever take from him. God knows, I am sure, what mothers feel when they are left as I am. He has the Mother-heart Himself. He understands all its yearning and pain. I leave all with Him. I see now quite well that it is the only way to live sanely and well. More and more I realize that we are not our own. We are bought with a price.

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"Gilbert has been much saddened by the death of his old friend Mrs. Lacy at Helston. It happened the very day baby was born, but I did not hear of it for a month afterwards. He cared very much for her, and will always mourn her. He tells me it is most

pitiful the change her death has made in that house. It is just as if the strong hand that kept it together, having snapped, there is a kind of chaos. He does not think Mr. Lacy will long survive her. It is beautiful, I think, to see such devotion, but there are the children. Surely if one has five or six children there is something left to comfort one. Gilbert says it makes no difference to Mr. Lacy. I should like to go down and see him; at least I can write to him. Carrie is to take her mother's place. Why not Maud, I wonder? One would have thought a sorrow like this would have brought out all that is best in her. I had a great many calls while I was ill, many from people I have never seen. Gilbert was quite astonished one night when we went over the cards together.

"'I had no idea that you were a person of such importance, little woman,' he said. Then I laughed and assured him that probably more than the half of them called on his account. He has become such an important person in Finchley, and the business of the bank is increasing enormously. Often he says the directors will have to reward him by giving him another and more important post; but I don't want to leave Finchley. I suppose a woman is like that; her heart clings to the place where she has found her first happiness. It would give me a positive pang to leave this house. Every nook and cranny of it is woven in with the fibre of my innermost being. I have had so many experiences here, and have learned the meaning of life. A man, of course, likes and

desires recognition of his personal success, but I think Gilbert has had a good deal already, and that he should be content for a while yet with his position here. Sometimes he talks so ambitiously about the future when we shall be quite rich that I feel a little anxious. I am sure that I should not like the kind of life he pictures for me. Quiet ways, a comfortable home, a few kind and tried friends, would content me to the end of my life. But as it is a wife's duty to be a helpmeet to her husband, I must not throw cold water on his ambitions. But I can't help hoping that it will be a good while before they are realized in the particular way he desires.

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"So far as my observation serves me, I don't think ambitious people can ever be very happy. The attainment of one object simply opens up the way for another, even more inaccessible. There is no end to it. Shakespeare was wise when he said, 'Shun ambition; by that sin fell the angels.'

"The Yuills have been very successful, but they don't seek to soar to farther heights. They have a beautiful old house, but quite simple, and their only extravagance is their carriage. I have been quite glad lately that they are extravagant in that direction, or I should not have had so many lovely drives. Directly I was able to go out Miss Yuill came to take me out, and together we have explored all the northern heights. It is as if quite suddenly the whole world had discovered them, and so many of the beautiful fields and woods are being sacrificed to

make room for the houses people want to live in. The 'boom,' as they call it, is extraordinary. One feels thankful that they cannot touch the Heath, though I seem to see a vision of it hemmed round with houses like a wall. The Yuills go to Scotland every summer; they have an old family house somewhere among the hills. Christina has asked me to go one day. Perhaps I shall, but it is always a golfing holiday Gilbert wants, and the sea. This year he is talking about Cromer. The Lacys are going there as a family. I must not cut him off from his old friends in their sorrow. He goes down occasionally on Saturday afternoon to call on them, and then, of course, sees Jane and his father.

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"I am getting to have such a number of friends here, though Gilbert says they are not the sort to be of much use to him. I have taken a bigger district, and now I go every Monday to the Women's Meeting. Twice when Mrs. Jermyn has not been able to attend, I have had to take it myself. I was terrified at first, but it is quite easy to speak to the women when you know them. It is no preaching they need, but just sympathy. Since my illness and I have lost my baby, I seem to understand them better, and to know the meaning of the pathetic look so many of their faces have. They talk much more freely to me too; our common experience has made a bond between us. To-day I was much surprised when Babette came to say Mrs. Growcher was waiting in the dining room to see me. Mrs. Growcher is a person who has

a little laundry at the Cross Roads, and who goes out to do a day's washing and charing to 'eke out' as she calls it. She has been a member of the Women's Meeting since its commencement. She is a woman about forty-five, and hard-working and honest. She has had a great deal of trouble, which she has met cheerfully. She has always been able to laugh at things, and the woman who can laugh heartily and spontaneously has infinite resources.

"But there was no laughter on Mrs. Growcher's face when I went to her this afternoon. She is a very plain person, with a large, vacuous face, and her bonnet is never by any chance straight. One day, when I was teasing her about it, she said:

"'God A'mighty never meant hus to wear bonnets, Miss—I mean Ma'm. If 'E 'ad meant hus to wear 'em, E'd 'ave mide our 'eads different.'

"She gave me her queer little nod when I entered, and immediately plunged into the business in hand.

"'I'm in trouble, Ma'm, along o' Bill, an' I wants yer to tell me what ter do.'

"'What kind of trouble?' I asked, making her sit down and at the same time ringing the bell for Babette to bring in a cup of tea.

"I may say without breach of confidence that Mrs. Growcher was one of the brands Mrs. Jermyn had plucked from the burning. She had found the little home in dire straits, and the poor creature, having lost heart, had taken to drink. She has nobly kept her pledge for over five years now, and has paid back

every penny of the money that had been advanced for her to make a fresh start.

"'Bill's come back, an' is a-settin' in the back room now. Ses 'e won't budge. What I want ter know is: kin I mike 'im budge?'

"She looked gloomy and tragic, and certainly the problem presented was a difficult one. Growcher was a ne'er-do-well and a loafer, who had hardly ever done an honest day's work in his life. He had taken himself off when the home was reduced to the lowest ebb, but having heard probably that his wife was now in a better way of doing he had promptly returned to the bosom of his family.

"'Where has he been all this time?'

"She shrugged her shoulders.

"'Ast me anuvver one, Miss. I don't wanter know wheer 'e's bin; I only wants him ter git. Bessie, she ses she'll 'it 'im on the 'ead if 'e don't, and she's a gel of her word; but I don't want no shindy theer. It's bad fer business.'

"'Have you been to the rector?'

"'No, Ma'm, I ain't,' she said stolidly. 'I thought as 'ow p'r'aps Mister Trent mite 'elp me. 'E'd be man ter man, dontcher know, and Bill 'e won't tike no jaw from a parson.'

"I could not help smiling. This would be an entirely new rôle for Gilbert, and I felt sure he would not refuse to act.

"In fancy I saw my big husband standing up to the bold Growcher, making him quail with a flash of his eye and the long, determined curve of his mouth

which I used to be so much afraid of at first, but which now has no terrors for me, for it is nothing but a make-believe to hide the kindest heart.

"'I shall certainly ask him, but he could not leave business for the purpose. He could get to the Cross Roads, I dare say, about six o'clock. We'll both come.'

"'Thank yer, Ma'm. It's all rite. I jes ses to Bessie, Mrs. Trent, she's the one fer me lud. Six o'clock, then, to shift Bill from the chimbley corner which he thinks is 'isn, only it ain't. Say, Ma'm, God A'mighty must 'ave some queer minnits a-lookin' dahn on the hinsecks squirmin' abart 'ere. I carn't 'elp larfin' w'en I thinks ov it.'

"She went downstairs laughing, and out into the sunshine, apparently fully convinced that, having shared her burden, it would presently roll away as it had done before. When Gilbert came up to tea half an hour later than usual, he was disappointing.

"'Sorry I can't to-night, dear. I've got to go to London immediately. Have an appointment at half-past six.'

"'A business appointment?' I asked.

"He said yes and explained that it was a late one, because the person he had to see had been otherwise engaged all day. I was disappointed, of course, but tried not to show it, though somehow I felt a little puzzled at this unusual proceeding on Gilbert's part. I had never known him to make an appointment before on such short notice. As he went out by the door he looked back to say quite casually:

"'I can't be home to dinner, of course. I'll have to dine the party somewhere. But I'll not be any later than I can help.'

"He did not kiss me as usual when he went away, and I thought he seemed worried. After he had gone I dressed myself and went out by the omnibus to the Cross Roads to view the situation and explain to Mrs. Growcher how my husband could not come. She was watching for us at the yard gate, and her expression was rather gloomy.

"'Ain't 'e come, Ma'm?' she asked disappointedly. 'Well, will you come in an' see Bill? 'E's a-settin' theer yit, an' 'e's sent Judy to the Three Bells fer beer. Either he gits out o' this 'ouse ternite, or I gits. Theer's goin' to be trouble ef 'e don't go quiet.'

"I perceived that Mrs. Growcher's slow temper had in the interval since I saw her got worked up. She was a large, powerful person, who, once roused, could make a very good fight. I had never seen Growcher, but I confess I shrank from the ordeal of interviewing him; but she was so anxious that I should, that I suffered myself to be persuaded. She only accompanied me to the cottage door, but left me to enter alone. It was one of the very old cottages, and had been already condemned by the authorities, who were so anxious to have everything new and up to date on the Great North Road, and had small regard for the ancient and picturesque landmarks. They had threatened Mrs. Growcher several times with eviction, but as yet had not

enforced it. Growcher was sitting by the table, a small, ferret-like creature, with a mean face and shifty eyes. A big mug of beer stood in front of him, and he was stuffing a fresh plug of tobacco into an old and evil-smelling pipe. He glanced up when I stood in the doorway, and, after a moment's contemplation of me, rose to his feet, a courtesy I had certainly not expected.

"'Good evening, Mr. Growcher,' I said quietly. 'Can I come in and talk to you for a few minutes?'

"'I don' mind,' he answered sulkily, but not aggressively.

"'I'm a friend of your wife's,' I said bravely, and I closed the door, partly to show him I trusted him completely, though in reality I was more than a little afraid.

"'You air?' he said inquiringly. 'She's done mighty well fer 'ersel', 'as Sal, but she ain't givin' nuthink away.'

"'Certainly not—why should she? She works very hard for what she earns. I'm going to ask you something, Mr. Growcher.'

"'Ast away,' he said imperturbably.

"'I'm going to ask you to go back quite a long time. How long is it since you and she were married?'

"He seemed surprised at the question, and began to count up the children's ages on his fingers.

"'Lemme see—it's jes gone nineteen years.'

"'It isn't too far back to remember all that happened. You promised a good deal that day, didn't you?'

"'I suppose I did—never gave it a thought. Theer's a lot o' tommy-rot in t' parson's service, Ma'm.'

"'Tommy-rot or not, you promised all these things, to make a home for Sally, and love and cherish her—have you done it?'

"'She didn't give me no chanst wiv 'er bloomin' tongue. Allus at me, she was. I tell yer wot, Ma'm, it's them jawin' wimmin thet's to blime most o' the time, and now I ain't goin' to tramp the streets an' sleep out wen she's got a plice like this. Is it likely? No, it ain't.'

"I drew in a chair and sat down and began to talk to him. It would take much too long to set it all down, and, indeed, I was never more amazed than at the ease with which I could talk to Mr. Growcher, concerning his own delinquencies and all the tragedy of his life. I was not in the least sure that I had made any impression, and most certainly I took a great deal upon myself. When I got up at last, I had promised him two things: to get him work, and also to ensure that he had a place in his home the very first week he could bring his wages to his wife. I undertook, as he expressed it, to square Sally, and marched him out in front of me as if he had been a child. I haven't got over the wonder of it yet. I advised him not to attempt to speak to his wife before he went away. 'It's deeds, not words, she wants, Mr. Growcher. Bring her the money, and she'll forgive the past.'

"Mrs. Growcher, her arms wet and foamy from the washtub, beheld the miracle of Growcher quietly

slouching down the road. When I explained what had happened, she looked at me with the oddest expression.

"'Well, I never! 'Ow did yer manage it? 'E sed as 'ow 'e'd set theer till domesday, an' Bessie she sed she'd give 'im till eight o'clock, but thet not a bite o' supper would e' 'ave in this 'ouse. 'Owever did yer manage it?'

"I told her just a little, and when I said he was going to work to prove the sincerity of his intentions, she merely remarked, 'Bill work! we *don't* think.' But I could see that my handling of him had impressed her. I put in a word for him at the same time, for I had been struck by the fact that there was a spark of something good in the man, and I hoped all things.

"Leaving the seed to sink into what was at the moment stony ground, I went home. I was rather tired when I got back, and missing Gilbert very much. I wonder why I should feel uneasy because he has gone away to-night. It is very foolish. A man must make such engagements; and he has not been in the habit of talking much about his business concerns. I will go early to bed.

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"It is the next day now. Gilbert was very late coming home. It was after midnight. He did not talk to me at all, and had no interest in the Growchers. I am afraid his interview was not successful. I don't wonder that wives hate business. It absorbs the best that is in their husbands, and fills them up

with worry. I wish it was not necessary for Gilbert to extend his borders as he talks about. We could live so simply and happily on his salary; then he would have more leisure.

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"Gilbert has been at Helston a great deal lately. Mr. Lacy died rather suddenly, and has left my husband one of the executors, along with Ned and the family doctor. He had made quite a considerable fortune in Helston, and all the children will be well off. Gilbert says they will have nearly ten thousand pounds each. It will make a great difference to them. I suppose Maud will now be the head of the house, as Ned is married. He is to have Hill Rise, and the younger ones talk of going back to live in that dear old house above the shop. I must go down and see them one day.

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"I went to Helston yesterday, and it has all interested me very much.

"I went first to Hill Rise, and found them busy packing up. That is, Carrie was busy, with a little spasmodic help from Florrie. Maud has already gone away. When I expressed my astonishment, Carrie looked a little hard and bitter.

"'Maud does not mean to have much to do with us, Mrs. Trent. She has always wished to get out of Helston.'

"'But what will she do? Where will she go? She must have a home somewhere,' I said blankly, for somehow the news disquieted me.

"'She's going to take a flat in London, and go in seriously for the concert platform,' said Carrie with a little quiver in her voice.

"'But doesn't she care about any of you here? It isn't quite fair to leave it all to you.'

"'She won't trouble about us; we get in her way,' said Carrie quietly. 'I don't understand Maud, Mrs. Trent. Mother never did. She said heaps of things to me when she was ill, and I know Maud was the only one she worried about leaving.'

"The tears rose in the child's eyes, and I saw that her wound was bitter, and that she deeply felt the loneliness and responsibility of her position. I was surprised at the bitterness of my own feelings toward Maud Lacy.

"'Never mind, dear, you do splendidly, and every one loves you,' I said rather lamely, feeling that the chief thing at the moment was to comfort and sustain this little burden-bearer who had the whole responsibility of a headless house on her shoulders.

"'Dear Mrs. Trent, I'm a pig,' she said suddenly as she dashed away her tears and smiled bravely. 'Of course, I don't mind it in the least, really, and I am only too glad to be of use to anybody. I'm happiest when I'm busy. And I don't envy Maud in the least little bit. I should hate to be drifting about the world like that, and I have not the smallest ambition for a career. Things will sort themselves out, I'm sure. Don't look so worried about me.'

"A little later I heard something from Jane that I thought explained Carrie's momentary breakdown.

It is quite well known in Helston, Jane says, that Hubert Parfitt is in love with Carrie, and that he has told his people he will never marry anybody else. But in the meantime Carrie is tied hand and foot. How selfish Maud Lacy must be! But I wonder why Gilbert did not tell me all the news about the Lacys. Of course, he must have known; indeed, Carrie told me some of the things he had said about it.

"I think I shall ask him when I get home.

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"I *did* ask him but he would not discuss them. He simply said:

"'Knowing how you loathe the whole Lacy crowd, I didn't care to bore you with details.'

CHAPTER XVIII

"Just lately a singular depression seems to have settled on my spirit; I do not know how to express it in words, or to explain it, but I am daily more conscious of a widening gulf between Gilbert and me, a strange and almost painful detachment of spirit. I wonder sometimes whether he notices it too. We don't have so many happy evenings—it is months since we had a long walk together through the lanes and across the fields. How we used to enjoy those walks! How full we were of happy interest in everything we saw! When we came across a new house building we loved to go into it, to inspect the plan of it, the situation of the rooms, and say to one another what we would do if we had such a house, what alterations we would make here and there. And always we were full of sympathy for the people who were going to live in it; we used to talk about them and wonder whether they would be as happy as ourselves.

"I am sure a great many wives in their secret hearts bear a grudge against the business which robs them of so large a portion of their husbands' time and society.

"When we came to live at Finchley first, everything was so different. Gilbert was always finished at the

bank by five o'clock; then we had long, delightful evenings together. There were so many things to be fixed up indoors — and he was so clever with his hands. I always loved to see him in his shirt-sleeves with a pipe in his mouth and a hammer in his hand. After all our furniture was placed and the house quite in order, he painted all the white treads of the stairs, while I sat on the topmost step with my needlework. As Babette went by to lay the table for dinner she beamed upon us as if we had been two happy children.

"It seems a trivial thing to speak about, but to-day the treads are being painted by the house-painter's man, and Gilbert has not even noticed that they are being done. A little thing, but it marks the difference! Gilbert is engrossed with bigger things; he has not time now to be interested in the little affairs of the house or the pattern of the Madras muslin I buy for my new short curtains. I go down to Oxford Street by myself and buy the muslin, and come home and make the curtains in the evening when he has gone to London. Shall I set down here, I wonder, what I saw one day in Oxford Street when I was there alone? I know it will hurt me to see it written down, but if a journal is to be a faithful record at all, it must set down both bitter and sweet. I was standing at a shop window just opposite Buszard's, waiting for my omnibus, when quite suddenly my heart seemed to stand still. I saw Gilbert and Maud Lacy coming out together. They looked so happy and occupied with one another, and she was

so handsomely dressed and stylish, that I suddenly became conscious of my shabby blue serge coat and skirt and my oldest hat. It had threatened rain when I left Finchley by the twelve o'clock bus—and though I saw Gilbert on my way out of the bank, he did not say he was going to London. I felt so strange and so distressed that, in terror lest they should see me, I darted into the nearest shop. It happened to be a boot-and-shoe shop, where I could not possibly want anything. But when the polite shopman came forward, I asked for a pair of house slippers. He brought out quantities, and, I am afraid, found me much preoccupied. I was, in fact, watching Buszard's door, and when I saw my husband put Miss Lacy into a hansom, with great tenderness and care, I thought, my heart seemed to die in my breast. I took the shoes, paid for them, and walked out into the open air, and it was as if a black pall had fallen over everything. I cannot say any more now. God give me strength to overcome all the wild thoughts in my heart. If I allow them to get the mastery, all will be over, I fear. I must trust my husband, I *must*. If I cannot, there is nothing left. He came home about an hour after me, but did not even then say he had been in London. I tried to ask him a question, but could not. My tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of my mouth. I know what I was afraid of, that he would say something which I would know to be a lie. It is better to know nothing, to trust and hope on. May God give me strength to do so.

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"Is it my Gilbert I am writing of, I wonder, my own man with whom I have been so happy? The chill I felt the first night Maud Lacy was in this house has settled permanently on my heart. It seems to have brought in its train a great silence. I suppose I am naturally a quiet person; but during the first part of my married life I felt lighthearted, and was often merry. Gilbert was so happy himself — and full of fun and teasing nonsense. But all that has gone. Mostly he is quiet, too, and will sit moodily for an hour at a time. He looks much older, I thought, to-day, and there is a peevish line about his mouth. I imagine his eyes are restless, and that he is ill at ease. Certainly, just lately, he has become irritable, and has very little patience with me. One day he said, as he dashed out of the room:

"'It is about as lively as a funeral in this house. Enough to give a fellow the blooming hump. Why don't you get a bit of life about the place?'

"I wonder where it is that I have failed. Have I changed so very much since the time a few years back when everything I did was perfection in his eyes? I have tried so hard to do all he wishes. Perhaps that is it — I have tried too hard. Something Christina Yuill said to me one day comes back just here. 'You've got a good husband, my dear, but don't you set out to spoil him. Above all, don't be a door-mat. I've never had a man myself, but from what I can see the happiest wives are they that exact their rights. They get them, too, and make better

husbands in the process. And never you forget that you are better than Gilbert Trent can ever hope to be. No, I'm not flattering you; I'm only telling you the truth for your own good and his.'

"I stopped her just there, feeling that it was disloyal to my husband to listen. But her words disturbed me; they had some stings of truth in them. Gilbert has entirely left off going to church, and he has not been at the Rectory for nearly two years. I should not dream of sending Babette down to the bank for him now when the Jermyns called. He says he can't stand them. I wonder have I done wrong to keep on being intimate with them, and clinging fast to my church life. I need it so much. I have such loneliness of spirit that if I had not these outside interests, especially my dear women at the Monday meeting, I should never be able to go on. All this looks rather tragic on paper, but there is not any tragedy that is apparent to the eye. We go on just the same, carrying out the routine of meals, Babette cleans the rooms regularly, and we consult about food, and try new things, and are outwardly a perfectly normal and well-ordered household. But there is a difference. Sometimes I want dreadfully to consult somebody, and have even thought of going down to speak to Jane But then I feel as if I had not the right, for it would not be entirely of myself I should speak. I should have to discuss Gilbert. Whenever I feel tempted, I think of some words in Romola which I have never forgotten.

"'She who willingly lifts the veil from her married

life transforms it from a sanctuary into a vulgar place.'

"I will keep my sanctuary as long as I can. God forbid that it should ever become a vulgar place!

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"I think so much of the difference our little son would have made to us if he had lived. Now he would have been about five years old. My eyes are blinded often when I try to picture how he would have run to meet his father at the door and been lifted up; then I should have crept to his side, and he would have had an arm to spare for me, and we should have been all the world to one another, just we three! Oh, I wonder why God took him, and, above all, why He has never sent me another child. Married people need to have children. They make the bond indissoluble. I feel quite well, and there seems to be no reason why I should not have another child. Once or twice I have tried to speak to Gilbert about it, but he will not. It seems to distress him, and I know that his disappointment is too keen to let him discuss it.

"'We are all right as we are, Kiddie,' he said one day. 'Look how free we are; we can do just as we like, without considering anybody.'

"'But that is just what I don't want, to be free like that!' I very nearly cried out, 'I want to be in these sweet bonds. I shall never be happy until I am a mother again.'

"Sometimes I have thought of asking Dr. Fletcher, but then again I can't. It would be easier to speak

to a complete stranger. One day perhaps I shall have the courage to go to London without saying a word to anybody, even to Gilbert, and consult a specialist. Then my mind will be set at rest. The idea grows upon me. Perhaps I shall go to-morrow.

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"I did not say anything to Gilbert about it. So often now I don't say anything. For the first two years there was nothing too trivial to talk about. I would even tell him if I had found a shop where the butter was better, and the eggs perfectly fresh. I got ready rather hurriedly soon after ten, and went in by train so as to save time, because I wanted to get back before lunch, so that if necessary Gilbert might not know I had gone to London. I had the address of a doctor in Weymouth Street, written on one of Miss Yuill's cards. She was very ill once, and went to consult him. She said he was splendid, so quiet and kind and reassuring. Once I thought last night I should run round to Totteridge Lane and ask her to come with me—but somehow I could not. It seemed far too intimate and sacred to tell anybody. I felt glad that it was a rainy day, and as I sat in the train, and looked at my fellow travellers, I wondered what was hidden inside of their hearts. Mine is so full and yet so empty! From King's Cross I took a hansom to Weymouth Street, and when I got down at Mr. Eldridge's door (it was a small green door with bronze ornaments) I did not wait a moment before ringing the bell. Immediately a man-servant admitted me, and I was put in the dining room,

where already three women sat. It was a long, low room with white walls, furnished sparsely. I envied the oblong Chippendale table with its lovely polish. Gilbert and I have been looking for just such a one for a long time. Books and magazines were scattered about, and the women were engrossed with one each. But they all glanced furtively at me. Two were elderly, and the other, a woman about my own age, extremely pretty and very handsomely dressed. She seemed nervous, I thought, and made a good deal of noise with the bangles on her wrists. Presently the two elderly ladies went together to the consulting room, and we were left. She cleared her throat, and presently rose and tried to adjust her hat at the queer old convex mirror above the mantelpiece. Finally she spoke: 'Would you mind telling me whether my hat is on straight? I had quite a drive in the country this morning — and it was very windy.'

"I assured her that it was quite straight. I wanted to add that it was very becoming—a bewitching sort of hat, which, set at an angle on quantities of well-dressed fair hair, made her face even more piquant. She looked the picture of health, too, and I longed to ask her what she could possibly want with Mr. Eldridge.

" 'Don't you think a fashionable woman's doctor might have a properly equipped boudoir for his patients? Why, any manicurist in Bond Street could give this one points,' she said presently.

"I laughed a little as I replied:

" 'Patients are not supposed to be so very

particular about their appearance, I think. Usually they come on more serious business.'

"She sat down opposite to me, with the same little friendly air which was quite fascinating.

" 'Do you know Mr. Eldridge well? Have you ever been to him before?'

"I replied that I had never even seen him.

" 'He has never been known to make a mistake in diagnosis,' she went on. 'At least, so I've been told —but he is a dreadfully blunt, plain-spoken person. I have heard of him reducing women to tears by his rough manner. He shan't reduce me—I promise you—though I quite expect him to be very angry with me——'

"I wanted very much to ask her what was the matter, but did not—because she was a complete stranger, and might resent it. I only remarked that she looked so well she need not be in any fear of his verdict.

" 'Oh, I'm not afraid. I'm perfectly well; but I shan't be if I go on much longer. I'm a hunting woman, and I don't want to have any more children. I've had two, one a son, and have done my duty to my husband's family. He knows I'm here to-day.'

"I sat dumb, and felt as if I could have screamed out.

" 'You look rather horrified, but tell me, what is the use of having an enormous family when one hasn't enough money to go round? It would simply mean giving up everything. I'm not built that way, so here I am. If anybody can help me, it is Mr.

Eldridge; he's the cleverest man in London. Only he won't. Something tells me he won't. Have I shocked you very much?'

" 'It is all so very strange,' I said in a low voice. 'I haven't any children—and I would give all I have in the world for one.'

"She laughed a little, but her eyes were very kind. I could see she felt for me, and quite spontaneously she put out her hand and touched mine. 'Let's hope the great Eldridge will give us both our heart's desire,' she said with a touch of cynicism which her eyes wholly belied. Just then the man-servant came and said Mr. Eldridge could see Mrs. Anson—at once.

"She passed out and we never met again. Just for that brief space we had hailed one another like ships that pass in the night. It was about twenty minutes before the door opened and I was called out. I felt so strange and dazed as I passed over the threshold, but, immediately the door closed upon me, such a hush settled on my spirit that I had neither fear nor nervousness. Mr. Eldridge's grave, kind manner, the strength of his face, the feeling of complete confidence and faith, lifted me clean above the stress of the moment. I had found a friend to whom I could open my heart.

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"It is to-morrow now—and I must finish my story of yesterday. When I went out into the street again the sun was shining and the sky was breaking into heavenly blue overhead. I felt dazed and strange,

and like an unreal woman in an unreal world. Only one thing stood out clear and vivid beyond all fear of contradiction. I need not go on hoping. I know now that however long or short my life may be, I shall go a childless woman to my grave. All that I shall ever know of motherhood are its pangs — for I did not so much as see my baby's face before they took him away. Somewhere perhaps God is keeping him for me, and will give him back to me. But why is it? I who love them so, who would never think them a trouble, who could give up everything for them, and that other woman who does not want them and could have many! Where is the justice, the common sense, the sanity of it? Oh, it is not right, it is not right! And Gilbert, this will be such a blow to him! I shall never dare to tell him. How does a wife keep her husband unless she has children? After a time they see another face, some one perhaps they would like better — oh, again I cry — what chance has the childless wife? I can't go home to lunch — I feel as if I could not see my husband for days and days. If only I might go down to Jane for a little, or back to La Grenade — anywhere so I can gather fresh courage. I have none to-day; my feet are weary, and my hope is in the dust. Wherein have I fallen short, dear God? Why am I not worthy of the great sacrament?

"It was about four o'clock when I got back, and Gilbert caught me on the stairs. He saw that something was the matter with me, and with much concern he drew me into the nearest room. Then

my heart seemed to break, my spirit burst its bonds, and I sobbed it all out in his arms. He was very, very kind and good, and tried to comfort me; but there was such a strange, wrung look on his face, as if he felt life too much for him too.

" 'Never mind, little woman; we must just try and be more to one another. We'll go away for a little holiday, and we must go out more together. We can be quite jolly as we are, and, after all, those who don't have kids are saved the bother of them.'

" 'Then you don't mind,' I said breathlessly. 'I was so afraid to tell you.'

"He smiled a queer, far-away sort of smile. 'I've known it for nearly five years,' he said. 'Fletcher told me that night when I came back from Helston and found you at death's door.' "

CHAPTER XIX

"Since I wrote here before, five weeks have elapsed. It is a very long time to leave a journal untouched; but I could not help myself. In the interval I have been back at La Grenade, to which I was summoned by the illness of my dear Miss Crosby. Life is an extraordinary thing, just like a web, weaving, weaving all the time, and none of us know what the pattern will be. Only it is certain we shall be woven in with it, hopes, fears, joys, sorrows, disappointments, and futile desires. I had a great longing to go back to Brussels that miserable day spent in London; and it appeared that they were thinking of me at the same time, and resolving to write and ask whether I could spare them a few days. Miss Eleanor's letter came next morning, and I devoured it while Gilbert was busy with his. She said that her sister had been ailing for a considerable time, and had been feeling the strain of the school, and they were contemplating giving it up and retiring to some quiet place, perhaps in England, to live. Miss Crosby had a great desire to see me, she said, and they would like to talk things over with me, assured I could be of great help to them. When I passed over the letter to Gilbert he at once said he thought

I should go. The prospect allured me too—for, though it seems dreadful to write it down, I felt the need of getting away to possess my soul for a little in quiet. It is what so few of us ever do—possess our souls. We dissipate them and weary them with much living, forgetting the ministry of quiet thought. It seemed to be all arranged in a great hurry, and I was quite conscious that Gilbert was a little relieved at the prospect. Perhaps he feared that I was going to mope and fret about Mr. Eldridge's verdict, but I think that would not have happened—could never happen now. I had my desperate hour that day in London streets, when I arraigned the Almighty for His dealing with me. Now I know what is in front I can be ready for it, and will go breast forward. After I have had these few days in my old home, I shall come back and settle down to what is my new life-work—to keep my husband's love. Such was my unspoken thought before I went away, and now I am back I will try to put it into action.

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"I was quite conscious of a quickening of the pulses—a feeling of happy anticipation as I drew near to Brussels. It was only my second visit since I had left it, and then Gilbert had been with me the year after our marriage, when he was determined to spend a Sunday at Terveuren, and another day at Waterloo, so that he might sit with me inside the battered wall of Hougoumont. But it is dangerous to repeat such experiences, for, after all,

each episode in a life must be a distinct and separate thing, and really can never be repeated. When the attempt is made, generally it is found that the essence has gone. Miss Eleanor met me at the station, her dear face all smiles and tears, and when we had hugged one another, and got into the *fiacre*, we were ready to talk.

" 'Madeline is not well, dear; sometimes she says she will never be well any more; but yesterday we had Monsieur Lepine to see her — you remember Monsieur Lepine, with all his decorations, that day at the Académie when the Princess gave the prizes? — and he was quite reassuring. He says that her heart is tired, that it is time for her to rest, and that we must give up.'

" 'I agree with him, but it will be a great loss to Brussels and to England — but especially to all the girls who will never now have the chance of coming to La Grenade——'

"Miss Eleanor smiled and patted my hand, and then quite suddenly said I had grown much thinner, and that my eyes were sad. I smiled bravely to reassure her, and presently changed the subject because I did not wish to talk about myself.

"Very soon we came to the dear old gates; the next minute I was at my dear Miss Crosby's side, and could have cried out at the change in her. She had grown quite thin, but her face was as sunshiny as ever, and she made me most lovingly welcome. I had my old room — and it touched me very much to find that they had never put any other governess

in it, but had kept it as a sort of shrine, which they only permitted very special guests to occupy. I felt myself immediately at home, and tried to slip into all the old ways of the house. To complete the illusion I even spent my mornings in the schoolroom, taking part in the tuition. But, ah! nothing was really the same.

"Can it ever be really the same when we have burned our boats and pulled down our bridges and left the gulf between? It never can, and when we try, it is only make-believe.

"But I had quite a happy time, and we talked over endless plans for the Miss Crosbys. I had even promised to look for the ideal cottage for them somewhere in the Great North Road not too far from Finchley. But first they wanted a long winter in Italy, where they hoped to realize some of the travel and study dreams of their youth.

"Gilbert wrote quite often, but somehow his letters gave me no heart-beat. They seemed to be mostly written in business hours—and so often broke off to say that a man was waiting for him or he had to go to a business appointment. There was none of the abandon of the long-ago time, when he poured all his passionate heart out on paper, and let all the world go by.

"I wrote one of that sort to him at La Grenade one night when I could not sleep in my lonely bed, and all the glamour of that brief love-passion came upon me like a great flood. I simply poured myself out in that letter, and was so afraid lest I should

repent me of it that I posted it first thing in the morning without reading it over. Then I waited, dear God, how I waited for his answer! But none ever came. At least, no real answer to that passionate call from a woman's deepest heart.

"What is to be said to a man who will say in reply to such a thing, 'I received your kind letter yesterday'? I laughed out loud when I read that, and put it in the fire. It was the first angry thing I had done, but my heart was hot with shame when I recalled my passionate appeal for the love of the early days, my eager questioning as to how and where I had failed. I did not write again until it was time to fix my journey home. I heard regularly from Babette — poor, faithful Babette — who had cried unrestrainedly over my going, and had owned to the most dreadful homesickness. But, as I explained, I could not take her with me, as she was the chief buttress of the house. But I have promised Mimi, now the wife of a market porter called Jules Torré, and the mother of little Jules, that when we go for our summer holiday I shall shut up the house and Babette shall pay her a long visit, and once more taste the joys of the boulevards.

"I arrived at Victoria at seven o'clock one evening, and Gilbert was on the platform looking so handsome and so lovable that all my heart went out to him, and I just nestled to him, glad to feel his big arm round me once more, and calling myself a fool for ever doubting him. Dear God, how I love him, with that slavish devotion which never knows

one straying thought, how proud I am of him! To-night I would not have him different in one single particular. He was much interested about the Miss Crosbys, and listened delightfully while I told him of their plans.

" 'It was just about time they let you go, my dear,' he said grimly. 'I had made up my mind to fetch you on Saturday if you had not come.'

" 'Oh, that would have been delightful,' I cried ruefully. 'I wish now that I had stayed. I went out to Terveuren by my little self and even found that bank in the Laecken woods. It was in possession of the squirrels gathering in their winter hoard of nuts. But nothing is the same.'

" 'Neither is it the same here, Hessie, and I'm jolly glad you're back. I met old Jermyn yesterday, and he was anxiously inquiring. Your old women at the meeting apparently don't like anybody else in your place.'

"His voice took the laughing, bantering note which any mention of my outside work never failed to bring. He did not care about it, I knew. He would much rather I had developed into a fashionable sort of woman full up with social engagements.

" 'Seen anything of the Yuills?' I asked, to change the subject.

" 'Went to supper with them last Sunday night; duty affair on their part and mine. Good grub, but mighty slow show. Here we are, thank goodness!'

"I was quite glad to see my home again and Babette's face of smiling welcome.

"After dinner, while Gilbert smoked over the evening paper, I went to tell Babette my news and get all hers.

"Amongst it there was one disquieting item, that Monsieur had stopped away several nights from home without letting them know, and thereby caused them much anxiety. But though these words alone drew the curtain of night over my soul, I never put a single question to Gilbert, but sat down opposite to him as if nothing had happened. I went early to bed, and, being physically quite exhausted, fell immediately asleep. When I awoke the gray dawn was in the room, and I was still alone. I got up, crept across the floor, and, softly opening the dressing-room door, looked in. Gilbert was asleep there, his dear head lying soft on his pillow like a child's. I cannot write down what was in my heart as I crept back and hid my face and my aching heart from every eye but God's.

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"A tremendous thing has happened in our lives. Gilbert has got a new appointment. He had been growing so very discontented lately, so often saying he was sick of Finchley, and even hinting of going out to South Africa or Canada to seek his fortune, that I never seemed to know a moment's peace of mind. I felt that any day he might come in and say, 'Pack up, we are going to-morrow!'

"What strange, restless creatures men are. How quickly they are irked by routine, how they long for change and variety and perpetual motion! I am

sure that if women entered Parliament there would be no more politics as men understand them. Women are all Conservatives, so that the party strife would die away. In its place, however, they might get a kind of internal strife which would be worse. Just when Gilbert seemed to have made up his mind for action of some kind, a letter came from his directors requesting him to attend a meeting of the board that very day. I could see how elated he was, though he tried to hide it from me.

"'Just about time they were making a move of some kind in my direction——' he growled. 'But I'm not taking anything they like to heave at me, mind. A man who has done what I have here can afford to pick and choose——'

"'Do you think they'll ask you to leave Finchley?' I asked, and I felt my heart quail at the prospect. I have got rooted here. I have my friends, and my work as well as my house; it would be quite dreadful to leave it all, only I must hide all that. I must try not even to let Gilbert see that I am anxious about to-day's issue.

"'Leave Finchley—I should just rather think they ought. I've had just about enough of this rotten one-horse place. If there's anything I loathe, it's Suburbia. Why, even Helston was preferable in some ways. At least, a chap was somebody there. His position was clearly defined.'

"I tried to crush down the sigh that wanted to escape. The difference between men and women seems to be that women find their chief happiness

within. They live in a sense the cloistered life, while a man is happiest among the din and conflict of the world. It must be so, I suppose, in order that the work of the world may be carried on. Gilbert went down to the bank to tell his clerks that he had to go to London, then, because I urged him, he came back to change his clothes. Just lately somebody recommended him to a new tailor in Bond Street who makes a study of the middle-aged figure. Gilbert is so afraid of getting stout as he gets older, and, now he is almost forty, has to look after his figure. I assured him he looked lovely, and as slim as there was any need for in his blue serge suit, and I sent him away with a kiss and a prayer in my heart. After he was down at the foot of the stair, and I had to run to the bow window of the drawing room to watch him turn the corner, he came running back and took me all in his arms — crushing me up tight.

"'You're a ripping good sort, old girl, and I'm not half good enough for you. I never was, and never will be. Whatever they offer me, I hope it will be something you'll like. I've a jolly good mind to tell them half my success here is owing to you.'

"Then he went away as suddenly as he had come, leaving me happier than I had been for long. He *is* all right, I am sure, and perhaps after all I have not disappointed him so much. I will try to rejoice with him whatever happens to-day. The chief thing is that he should not be disappointed.

"He did not come back to lunch, at which I need

not have worried, for it was nearly eleven before he went away—and his appointment was at twelve. Near one o'clock I got a telegram saying he had been given Gracechurch Street, which I took to mean the managership of the branch there. So then I knew he would not come home for an hour or two. I supposed the directors asked him to lunch to celebrate the occasion. I tried to settle down to a quiet afternoon with my needlework, but I felt very restless, and soon after two I walked round to Totteridge Lane to see Miss Yuill. They have a sweet old house in the Lane. It is called The Yews, and has rather a sombre row of trees about the entrance. But inside it is just a dear, homely, cosy house; there is nothing grand about it, but I have never seen a more restful, cosy sitting room than Christina's. It is all comfortable, chintz-covered chairs and couches, and has heaps of pictures, chiefly Scottish water colors hung very low on the wall to rest on the top of the bookshelves which run all round the room. Christina is the sort of woman who gives you tea whatever hour you call on her. She simply loves tea, and makes everything an excuse for taking it.

"'There you are,' she said, looking up from her knitting and her capacious chair. 'I thought you'd be here the day some time. Grace, some tea as quick as you can——'

"Grace was a very angular parlor maid. Gilbert says she has a face like a horse, and that he would not keep her a moment in the house. But she is one

of the treasure species, and has been at The Yews for thirteen years.

"'Gilbert's gone to London,' I said as I dropped into a chair and began to unbutton my gloves. 'He's been sent for by the Bank, spelled with a big B. I am in terror in case it means that we shall have to leave Finchley.'

"'It would be a misfortune to a heap of folk, and nothing less than a calamity at St. Luke's. What does he expect?'

"'I don't know what he expects; I know what he wants. But don't you think that he could go down to the city every day, same as Mr. Yuill does?'

"'Perfectly; when it's pointed out to him that you don't want to leave Finchley, and Finchley can't spare you, I've no doubt it will be all right.' She spoke confidently and cheerily, as if there could be no doubt. But I did not feel at all sure about it.

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"I stopped with her till nearly four o'clock, and when I got home Babette told me there was a lady waiting to see me in the drawing room. In the same breath she informed me that Monsieur had not yet come home.

"When I entered the room I did not recognize the lady, who looked middle-aged and rather dowdy. I had never seen her before.

"'You don't know me,' she said abruptly, 'and I have never seen you before; but my sister attends the Women's Meeting at St. Luke's, and I have often heard her speak about your sympathy and the help

you are to them all. I am in great trouble; I need your help; and it is a matter I can't talk of except to a stranger. I could not tell my sister, for instance. May I talk to you without even telling you my name——'

"I drew up my chair to hers, and I saw then that her face, which must once have been a comely one, was ravaged by a grief or some inward care.

"I replied that anything I could do to help her would be done with all my heart.

"She put up her veil, wiped her nervous mouth with her handkerchief, and began to speak:

"'My husband's a commercial traveler, and we live at Crouch End. We have four children, two boys and two girls. He is forty-nine and I am fifty-one. I was a school teacher when we married, and I've had a happy life. My children are doing well. Both the girls are teachers. Alice, the elder, is going to be married to a chemist at Bexhill-on-Sea next year.

"'It has always been a trouble to me that Bert—that's my husband—has had to be so much away from home, from Monday to Friday every week, so that he has really been a sort of week-end visitor in his own home. But, as I say, we have been very happy, and up to two years ago I'm sure a better husband and father never existed. He is good-looking in a dashing sort of way—and very jolly. The children have always adored him; he has never grown old to them; and that's a great thing for boys especially, don't you think?'

"I replied that it was undoubtedly a splendid thing, and waited with a sort of heartsickness for what was coming.

"'About two years ago he began to be different. It was after the midland and north-country journey, which takes three weeks, and happens four times a year. I thought he was not very well when he came back; he was so irritable and short with the children and with me. And from that time he kept on getting worse, so careless and bored with us, especially with me. I began to feel somehow that he did not like to see me about the house. You have no idea, Mrs. Trent, what a woman goes through when that sort of thing is forced upon her. There is n't any need for eternal punishment for her, supposing she was bad enough to deserve it. Her hell begins right enough here. I've been as good as I knew how. I've worked hard for Bert and the children, and gone without lots of things, especially clothes. I'm fond of dress, though perhaps you would n't think it, but I've never put myself first. It was the way I was brought up, I suppose. My mother was a God-fearing woman, and believed that men were superior creatures to be waited on and deferred to. But I'm sure that's bad for them; most of them are born with enough conceit of themselves. But I must n't weary you. I don't know if you noticed that I said I am two years older than Bert; and, of course, a woman ages more quickly than any man. I lost my figure when Cecil was born, though I only measured twenty-one inches round the waist when

I married, and now I'm twenty-nine. But what does it matter when one is happy? Both my girls have fine figures, and their father loved to walk them out on Sundays after church. It's always a bad sign when a church-going man begins to slacken off church; it shows there's something wrong inside. But I don't want to be too long-winded; I'll just get to the end of my story quickly. One day, when I was brushing Bert's clothes on the Monday after he had gone away to Bradford, I found a letter in his pocket——'

"She undid the clasp of her hand-bag and produced a letter, and asked me to read it. But I said quickly I would rather not; and would she just tell me what was in it.

"'It's a woman's letter—a love-letter—and it has been going on for a while. She lives at Bradford, and is the head of a department in one of the big warehouses. Evidently she knew he was married from this, but, of course, she didn't care. I don't know how I bore myself for the next few days. I pretended I was not very well, and stopped in bed. The children were all so concerned about me, and wanted to telegraph for father, but, of course, I did not let them. But because I did not write to him as usual, he came home four days sooner than he had said. He was not easy in his mind, I found out after. I was in bed when he came back, and when he stood beside me I just took the letter from under my pillow and handed it to him without a word. It was an awful moment. I can't think how God, if He has

all the power they say, can bear to have creatures come through such things. It isn't right. Then he owned up. He just said, "'There isn't any use beating about the bush, Jinny. The game's up; and now what are you going to do?'" Not a word of sorrow or repentance; only upset at being found out, and a sort of reluctance for the children to know. He left me to decide, told me what he was prepared to do in the way of allowance if I wanted to leave him, and that's where I am now. My brain is nearly turned with thinking, and I couldn't tell a living soul in Crouch End, where we are so well known. It would mean the end of everything, and spoil all the children's prospects. Then I thought of you, and of all that my sister Kate has told me about your wonderful gift of sympathy and healing. Bert has gone again to Nottingham and Leicester, but he'll be home day after to-morrow, and I'm to have my answer ready. Tell me what to do.'

"She leaned back in her chair, closed her eyes, and began to rock herself to and fro. I cried to God in my heart to help me, to give me the fitting word, if it was His will that I should give the cup of cold water to this rent and suffering soul. Then quite suddenly I had a clear message, and knew what I had to say. I knelt down beside her, and stroked the poor, work-worn hands that had known no weariness of service for those she loved.

"'Listen, my dear; you must not leave him. If you do, he will go down. There is nothing more certain than that.'

"'I do believe you're right. But do you think I shall have strength to keep it from the children?'

"'Yes, for God will give it to you, and you will win him back. All these years of love and fealty will not be lost. God will see to that. Go back and do the best you can.'

"'It's what I want to do,' she said, with a little fluttering sigh, 'for what life has a middle-aged woman like me away from her husband and children? Some of them might side with him even. I'm nearly sure Edie would. She's so like him in everything. Well, I'll do it, and I do thank you. Can I come now and then when I'm finding it particularly hard? Your eyes are so kind and true, one could just tell you anything, and be sure it would go no further.'

"As I rose to let her out I heard Gilbert's voice asking for me. I looked out, and just asked him to wait in the dining room a minute. Then I took my visitor, whose name I had not even asked, to the door and said good-bye. I just waited a moment in the silent passage to recover myself. I could hear Gilbert's impatient whistle inside the dining-room door. He says he is to enter at Gracechurch Street on the 15th of October, and that we shall have to be out of this house in three weeks' time."

CHAPTER XX

"After all, we are not to leave Finchley. At first Gilbert said we could not possibly remain, and that it would be necessary for him to live nearer to his work; but, after considering things and talking them over, he has changed his mind, no doubt partly out of consideration for me. He is to have such a large salary at Gracechurch Street, and all his investments have been so successful, that he says we can double our expenditure without being in the least wasteful or extravagant. He has decided to take a lovely old house in Totteridge Lane called Grey Gables. It has been empty for quite two years, and the landlord was very glad to hear of tenants like us. There was no difficulty about getting a lease arranged. Gilbert has taken it for seven years with a break at three and five. I am so glad about it, chiefly because I shall not have to leave all the dear friends I have made, the Jermyns, the Yuills, and Dr. Fletcher, and, above all, my dear women at the Monday meeting. I love them all just as much as they love me, and we have started so many things this winter in connection with it—a penny savings bank, a cutting-out class, and some elementary cookery. Babette is going to teach them

the science of bones in cookery, and what lovely nourishing soup can be made out of stuff which so many English women throw away. This is a fascinating subject, but I am wandering away from Grey Gables. It is the loveliest old place, like a story-book house or a dream house. It has two acres of lawns and gardens—so old and matured, with turf like velvet. Think of that to a woman who has not had even a backyard of her own for seven years! The house itself is not in the least pretentious—a dear, homey place with wide, low rooms and a panelled hall. There is a double drawing room. I shall fill it with restful chairs like those in Christina's drawing room, only she says I shall have to send to Edinburgh for them, as they only make gimcracks in the Tottenham Court Road. Occasionally Christina is quite caustic about England and English things. Her heart is really in Glen Isla, and she is always hoping Andrew will get married and let her away to live at Brean. 'But there is n't a chance now,' she said one day, 'for he is nearly fifty, and getting to be an old man.' I said indignantly that fifty was not old at all, and that it would be quite a good thing if some men did not marry till then, as they would have more sense. But she went on again precisely as if I had not said anything:

"'Forby'—(a great word with her)—'he'll never marry now, for he has seen the only one he has ever cared about, and he can't get her.'

"I felt very curious about this unknown flame of Andrew Yuill's, but I never got any satisfaction out

of his sister. I felt disappointed, however, for I had set my heart on his marrying Jane just as soon as Mr. Trent would not need her any more. I have the greatest respect for Mr. Yuill. He is such a straightforward, splendid sort of man. He would be quite incapable of telling the smallest untruth even in business, when Gilbert says it is absolutely necessary sometimes.

"There is a line in one of Stevenson's poems which I always apply to him mentally: 'Winds austere and pure.' Of course, they were Scotch winds. Somehow since I got to know the Yuills I have such an idea of the strength and trustworthiness of Scotland. Everything there, even human character, seems to be founded on the rock.

"But I never say that to Gilbert. He doesn't like the Scotch, and says they are always pushing their noses in where they are not wanted; also that they should stay in their own country—especially as they are always praising it up as the only country in the world.

"Oh, dear, I did not mean to write all this; I have wandered a long way from Grey Gables, but somehow in writing a journal, especially when one has no literary experience, one just meanders on, and one thing suggests another, so that in the end it is bound to be a sort of medley. But it is true enough to life.

"There was only one thing which gave me a pang in the house, and that was the nursery gate at the far end of the long corridor. It was used to shut

off the children's little wing from the upper landing and the stairs. It is built on two floors only, and the little wing of three rooms must have been added when the children of some generation came. Already I have a little plan, that some day, when Jane comes to live with us altogether, as I hope she will, I shall give her these rooms. She can put her own things in them and have a real sanctuary. Gilbert was very kind and tender about it, and said he would take care to have the gate removed before I saw the house again. After we had been all over it, we went into The Yews and had a good talk with Christina.

"I wanted most dreadfully to tell Gilbert about the lady who had called in the afternoon, but, of course, I did not, chiefly because she had relied so implicitly on my respecting her confidence, and partly because it was not a subject on which I could have talked with any freedom to my husband. Next morning I had a letter from her giving her name and address. She wrote so gratefully and warmly, just as if I had done something really great for her. Gilbert looked across the table and asked who my letter was from. 'A Mrs. Arkwright, the lady who was here yesterday,' I answered.

"'What is it about?' he asked.

"'Only the matter she came to ask my advice about yesterday,' I answered rather confusedly. 'It was a very private matter. I am sorry I can't let you see the letter.'

"'Oh, I don't want to pry into any of your

secrets,' he said with a laugh. 'I hope you gave her sound advice, however, not too much tinged by sentiment.'

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"I am writing this page in my own room at Grey Gables, and though we have not been long in the house, we feel quite at home. I am going to like it very much, I am sure, and Babette is quite charmed with it. I shall not be able to keep her very much longer, I am afraid, as she is now betrothed to François Torré, the brother of Jules, Mimi's husband —and as soon as they can get a little farm near Grenoble, to which the Torrés belong, she will go back to her beloved Belgium. We shall miss her most frightfully, and hope she will stay for months yet; Christina is going to try to get me some Scotch maids, as they do much more work, and are very capable all round. I have got such a pretty bedroom, which I shall use as a sitting room too. I have been very extravagant with my carpet. It came from Paris, and is a lovely soft gray with a border of rather dull roses. I shall make silver-gray curtains with worked roses in the border to hang at the three long windows. Gilbert gave me fifty pounds to spend on my own room, and I feel very selfish when I have to say I have spent it all. I took my lovely old Dutch bureau up from the drawing room, and it all looks so beautiful. I take a great deal of joy in my house. It gives me quite a thrill when I am successful with curtains and trimmings. I am sure God meant women to take this personal kind of interest in their

houses; He knows how it comforts them and fills up empty spaces. I know that there are people who think it is only brainless people who can give so much of their time and thought to such trivial things. But *are* they trivial? Whatever contributes to the harmony of life is surely worth doing. Gilbert is *so* interested. Almost we have gone back to the days when he painted the stair treads and hung all the pictures. I have not had such happy weeks for a long time.

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"But Gracechurch Street is going to take Gilbert more and more away from me, I can see. Even when he gets away from the bank at half-past six o'clock—which is the earliest possible moment he ever can leave—it is nearly eight when he gets to Finchley. Of course, he does not come home to lunch. I must try and get used to it; but it is a very lonely existence. What I feel so much is that I am quite outside of that part of his life. He tells me a little, of course, and everything seems to be going smoothly at the new office, but always there is the feeling of the closed door. I think Gilbert begins to look quite old, and sometimes, when he is sitting quietly by the fireside, I seem to see so many worry lines on his face. One night I sat down on his knee, and his face flushed all over, quite like a schoolboy. How I laughed at him!

"'You don't need to be blushing like that, Gibbie. Once upon a time——'

"He buried his face on my shoulder and hugged me close.

"'Once upon a time, Hessie,' he almost groaned. 'By God, I wish it could come back.'

"Perhaps I have been too reserved with him, after all! Men are so hard to understand. I have always thought it was best not to show them how much you care. I remember when he left me at Terveuren I had an awful feeling, as if I had made myself some quite cheap thing not worth the taking. I even wrote that to him in one of my letters, and I have kept the lovely letter he sent me in reply. He did write beautiful letters. That is why I felt the difference so much when I visited the Miss Crosbys at La Grenade, and he sent me disappointing scraps, full of information about people in whom I do not take the slightest interest. I have so often heard that husbands weary of wives who demonstrate too much —I should shrink away into nothingness if I saw any sign of that in mine. It is why I kept myself a little aloof, not that I love him less—I love him more, far more, than I did at the beginning, and I have such a strange yearning over him—as if he were my big child as well as my husband. Often I try to tell God about him in the dark, when I pray that I may have him altogether, body, heart, and soul. Sometimes I think that if only a little of the fire of love for the Lord Jesus could touch Gilbert, his manhood would blossom into a heavenly thing. There are such possibilities in his big, generous nature; oh! I wonder why God does not lay hold of him as he did of Saul on the way to Damascus! He is worth saving. I do want him to begin consecrating his life

as some of our friends do. When I dare to talk of religion—which is very seldom, for Gilbert laughs at it all, and says it is just a game people play like politics—I point out to him that being religious takes nothing from a man's dignity, but gives him all.

"I have been going to church quite alone now for over three years. I have not got used to it. I never shall. And I never talk to Gilbert about what I do in the parish, because he chaffs me so about it, and calls me the Mother Superior, the Arch Confessor, and all sorts of bantering names.

"I wonder if I am wrong and foolish to hate chaff so much. It seems to me so silly and vulgar, and so often the attribute of shallow natures. But Gilbert is not shallow—he has a tremendous grip of big things. One night a friend of his was here, and they were discussing the political situation in South Africa. I was quite astonished. I felt more and more how many sides of him I had not touched.

"What we want as man and wife beyond doubt is some unity of purpose. Gilbert goes to the city every day, carries on the business of the bank, makes money for it and for himself, while I keep the house at home, and look after Babette and Agnes, the Scotch maid Christina got for me from Alyth, and when he comes home at night we dine; then, if he is not going back again, he dozes over the evening paper and goes to bed at ten.

"Mr. Yuill wanted him to take some interest in local affairs, to go on a committee of residents for the purpose of watching and safeguarding the amenity of

the district, but he just laughs and says he takes no interest in suburban cackle. He goes to a good many big city banquets, and is more and more involved in tremendous financial undertakings, and I know he is making money fast by the way he spends it. He gave me a carriage as a birthday gift, but I have nobody to drive out in it, and I would just as soon walk. Sometimes I wonder whether I did right in keeping him here after all, and whether it would not have been better to let him buy one of the old houses in Bloomsbury he spoke about.

"It is so difficult for a woman to know the best thing to do in such circumstances, but certainly, if I was selfish then, I have paid the price. My loneliness is fearful. More and more I am shut in upon myself, and I suppose I am a dull companion. Only Gilbert never seems to notice whether I am dull or cheerful, any more than he notices what kind of a frock I have on.

"Again I ask, why did God take away my little son, who would have filled up all the gaps? If it is the highest kind of faith to accept all the happenings of life without a single question or doubt, then I am very far from it indeed.

"Life does not grow easier as we grow older. We lose the light-heartedness and buoyancy of youth, and experience brings no gift comparable to it. Looking round us, we see so much inequality and apparent injustice that we become rebellious. Power, unless it is beneficent, is an evil thing. What am I writing at this moment? It is God I am

arraigning, even suggesting that I might handle human destiny better. May He forgive my puny presumption! But He will. The most comforting thing in the religion which upholds women all over the world is the hidden assurance that God understands every bit of us. I am not ashamed to tell Him all my anguished thoughts about Gilbert, my desire to be to him all a wife should be in every sense, and my bitter mourning over my apparent failure. Perhaps somewhere away at the back of this big failure the light is shining, and some of my poor efforts may yet blossom like the rose in my life and in Gilbert's. There must be something in my nature which requires this searching discipline, and too much happiness might have made me arrogant and noisy and selfish.

"If I read my Kempis right, I am on the highway to glory. But I don't want to go there just yet, or by this tortuous way. I am a warm, human woman, and I love my husband above everything on earth. If I am called to give him up, I shall not do so cheerfully or gladly, nor will I pretend. I wonder do I ask too much? When I look round at other women and see what they have and take out of life, I can truthfully answer that I don't think my demand exorbitant. It is my husband's love I want—his whole love. I want to know his thoughts, to be a part of his inner life, to walk with him side by side in every happening of life.

"I have his trust, I know. I overheard him say one day to somebody who was calling:

"'Oh, ask my wife. She is my sheet-anchor. I do assure you we should go to pieces without her——'

"There was not a note of irony in his voice. It was grave and sincere, and had even a little poignant ring which indicated passion. Perhaps I should be content with that. 'The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her.'

"That is the Bible definition of the perfect wife. But, oh! it is a height I cannot attain to! I want to be crushed up in his arms—as I was at Terveuren, and to feel the cling of a baby's arms round my neck, his child and mine. If these are wicked thoughts, God should not have given us the kind of natures we have. I am getting morbid—I must stop here, stop at once. But it is a relief of no ordinary kind to write down one's innermost thoughts. No one will ever read them. I have come to the conclusion that very happy women do not need to keep journals. All their records are in their hearts, expressed in the sunshine of their faces.

"As I was doing my hair this morning I found quite a little shock of gray. I ran into Gilbert's dressing room and showed it to him, and he only kissed it and laughed. 'Look at mine; it's going to be a heat which reaches patriarchal distinction first,' was all he said.

"Sometimes my face looks old and tired. It lightens up when I smile. I must try to smile more. I have so much to be thankful for, and there are so many women who are cheated even of the ordinary pleasant things of life. I have so many of them!

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"I hear occasionally from Mrs. Arkwright, but I have never seen her again. She expresses her present mode of life by the two words 'struggling on.' She has presented a brave front, so that neither her family nor the world suspect the canker at the root of her home life. It has given her an amazing courage—a kind of quiet philosophy which has certainly ennobled a quite commonplace character. Her relations with her husband must be very difficult. She says: 'I have lost him, and even though he may have never seen that woman again, I shall never get him back.' I hope time will prove her wrong, and that he will yet be at her feet. But even then nothing could be the same. The gem must be flawless to satisfy a woman's heart.

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"Since I wrote here last, many strange things have happened, and though it is only weeks, I am years older in thought and experience. Gilbert's father is dead. It is a great relief, for he has suffered much in the last year or two, and been practically dead to the world. Jane has been a pattern daughter, her patience knowing neither fret nor weariness. Meanwhile, however, she has had great joy in the cultivation of her writing gift. Now she will be quite free to order her own life as she chooses and thinks best for the career she has in view. Jane is one of the few women independent of matrimony. She does not seem to feel any special craving in that direction. She is calm, well balanced, with her feelings under perfect control. She would be a good wife and a

wise mother, but then again she can be an equally dignified and happy single woman. She is complete in herself; while I am so very dependent on those about me.

"The telegram announcing Mr. Trent's death came to me here at Grey Gables, and it seemed the simplest, easiest way just to get dressed as quickly as possible and take it down to Gracechurch Street. I put a few things in a bag, quite determined that I would go down myself to Helston, whatever Gilbert thought about it. I could not bear to think of Jane being quite alone in that little dull house in the fields quite away from the town.

"Gilbert had not been gone more than a couple of hours when the telegram came, and it was not long after eleven when I got out of the hansom at the bank door and walked in. It was Mr. Dudgeon who came and spoke to me; he is always so kind and attentive whenever I go to Gracechurch Street. He said Mr. Trent was in, and I followed him through to the private room door, which he opened, and showed me in. Gilbert was not alone. Before the door closed behind me I was conscious of a sudden anger which bore down upon me like a whirlwind. It was Maud Lacy who sat there in the client's chair close by Gilbert's desk, with her jingling chatelaine bag of highly polished silver lying on it, and the scent of the perfume she uses pervading everything. I just nodded to her—not even noticing her outstretched hand. Then I am afraid I turned my back on her—though I was all the time conscious of her presence,

intensely conscious. I took out the telegram and literally thrust it under Gilbert's nose. I forget what I said now, if, indeed, I ever knew it. I only know I had no desire to soften the blow, or to be in the smallest degree sympathetic or kind. I hated him at the moment almost as much as I hated her, and I did not care in the least though they both knew it. I did not like the look on his face or hers — both were altogether hateful. I simply told him the train I was going by, said my hansom was waiting, and walked out. I did not care a straw what they or anybody thought. I knew Dudgeon was watching me, but I did not look in his direction, and, climbing into the hansom, I drove away. Oh! but how terribly I felt! I had no kind or pitying thought left for Jane or for anybody. I thought only of myself and my real or imagined wrongs. Eleven o'clock in the morning, and she was there sitting with him! It made me gnash my teeth.

"I was totally unconscious of the streets through which we passed, and when I reached King's Cross I paid a quite exorbitant fare to my cabman, and proceeded at once to the booking office. While I was seeking for change there, Gilbert came calmly in front of me, took the tickets, and we walked together to the train. They were first-class tickets. Gilbert never travels third now anywhere, or likes me to do it. I got in without saying a word, and withdrew myself immediately to the other side of the compartment, and looked out. For quite half an hour we did not utter a word. It was the most ghastly, appalling

silence, but I could not have broken it to save my life. At last Gilbert did, after we had passed the junction, and the next stop would be Helston. What he said I can't recall exactly now, but it was something about Maud Lacy being in his room on account of her investments. I did not believe him. I did not even look at him as I answered in a voice I hardly recognized myself, that I had no interest whatever in Miss Lacy's investments.

"We came without another spoken word to Helston, got into one of the flys waiting, and began the two-mile drive to Risden. At such close quarters the strain was trying, and I began to talk very quickly about Jane's future and what she would be likely to do. Gilbert only answered in monosyllables — no man ever presented such a picture of discomfort.

"It was a frightfully slow horse, but in course of time we did arrive at the little old-world hamlet, and drew up at the cottage door. Jane came out quickly to welcome us, and then it seemed quite natural that I should shed tears, though they had nothing to do with the old man's death. I did not feel very sorry about that. I was only glad to get to Jane, to look into her dear, true eyes, to feel how good it was to be near her. I did not go with Gilbert to his father's room. I felt that neither he nor I was fit to stand together in the presence of death.

"When he said he must go back at four o'clock, I simply said I would stay with Jane, and had no idea when I would return."

CHAPTER XXI

"Those days at Risden with Jane did me great good. She is so restful and at the same time so strong. She never asks questions, but all the time I was conscious that she knew I had something on my mind, and was trying to bear me up by her strength. She did not speak much about her father, but some things she said to me the night of the funeral after Gilbert had gone away seemed to offer the key to the whole situation.

"'I felt glad when his eyes closed, Hessie, for suffering in every form is hateful. I have never believed much in the refining-by-fire process. It seemed to me that more palatable and less crude methods might be found. But in my father's case I saw its work. His heart became literally purged and clean like a little child's. He went back to God. I don't mean it in the canting sense, but my mother was waiting for him, and he was glad to join her.'

"I pondered much on these words. They were illuminating where human experience was concerned, but at the same time terrifying. I looked at her a little wildly. 'Do you think it is the only way, then, Jane? That we have all to go through it?'

"'Oh, yes, but some need less. You should be

immune, Hessie, or very nearly. If there should be any truth in the idea of reincarnation, you are certainly here for the last time.'

"'But why do you say that?' I cried, craning forward so that I might see her better where she stood like a seer, a sombre and striking figure in the half-light.

"'Because you are more nearly perfect than any human creature I have ever known——'

"'Oh, Jane, how can you say that? You have no idea how full I am of wicked and hateful thoughts. Why, even now I am feeling so bitter against Gilbert that I have not been able to speak to him, even here, in the house of mourning and death.'

"She uplifted her brows and shrugged her shoulders.

"'Gilbert! If you are angry with him, it is not without cause. He is my brother, and I love him dearly. I am proud of his success, too, but he is not, and never will be, good enough for you.'

"'Oh, Jane, don't say these things! They don't comfort me. They fill me with a sadness that can't be uttered. How have you known all this? I shall be ever afraid of your keen eyes after this——'

"'Oh, no, you won't. Gilbert is just an average man, a little inflated with his own conceit. He will have to suffer before he is of any use, and the pity is that not one of us can suffer alone. After that, will it surprise you to hear that I have written a humorous book? I had to, living out here in this tomb. I was driven to the act in self-defence. The publishers

are very pleased with it. They have offered me a hundred pounds on publication and a small royalty afterwards. So you see how much we need somebody to lighten destiny, when anybody is found to pay money for my poor stuff.'

"There was rather a sad, bitter note in Jane's voice, and I seemed to realize in a moment the absolute grayness of her life. She was well over thirty, and had spent all these years in serving. True, she had had her inner life, but very little brightness as it is generally understood. She had never been young.

"How I loved her as I looked at her beautiful face, so fine in its strength and dignity! Why was I not like that, instead of like some poor wind-flower ready to bend before every blast? I wanted to tell her some of my fears about Gilbert, but something kept me back, either Savonarola's warning to Romola, or some inward delicacy which shrank from putting the sordid and the vulgar into actual form. It was arranged that Jane should come to us for an indefinite visit, storing her furniture. For the present she declined the nursery wing at Grey Gables —only saying she would not feel like settling anywhere at present, and that we must all wait and see. A tenant was waiting for the Risden cottage, for in a small village there are seldom empty houses. We had a beautiful Sunday together, and when we came in from church there was Gilbert. He had risen early, he said, and cycled down. He was rather subdued, and seemed a little nervous about addressing

me. I tried to be quite natural, but I could not kiss him. I simply could not. In the afternoon, as we sat in the pleasant living room to which Jane had given such a wonderful individual touch, we had some visitors. Carrie Lacy brought her lover, Hubert Parfitt, to see us. They are to be married next week. I was so glad to see them both, and I liked him so much. A quiet, steady young man with few brilliant faculties, perhaps, but one can trust him. His face is so open and kind, his eye so clear and straight. Gilbert and he went away out for a stroll, apparently very glad to meet one another. Nobody had ever more friends among men than my husband. They simply flock to him, all sorts and conditions; he has something for them all. It is more difficult to be a wife to a popular man than the other kind. The wife of a popular man has to share him with all the world. Perhaps I ought to do it more cheerfully. I must try again, beginning by banishing these morbid fears. Oh, this poor journal! When I dare to go back upon it I find it overweighted by 'Try, try, try again.' I wonder whether Gilbert has ever, in the whole course of his life, been depressed by a sense of failure, or has ever been in the least conscious of his shortcomings. I never get away from mine, and I have only set down all these outrageously flattering things Jane said to me because they might give me more confidence later on.

"Carrie Lacy came in like a gleam of real sunshine. She is a dear, bright creature, who simply radiates happiness. She has had to wait so long for it, and

demolish so many obstacles, that perhaps she is now more fitted for it. Ours was all too rapid, secured perhaps too easily, and we knew so little of one another. While Jane went to get tea, the one maid having gone to her people in Helston, Carrie and I had a little talk.

"'Everybody is so kind,' she said with her pretty smile. 'Hubert's mother most of all. No, we are not going to live at Gresley, but at the Dower House, about half a mile away. It is not at all too near. I would not have anything different for the world.'

"'You have served a long probation—how many years?' I asked.

"'We don't count them, and they mean a lot to us. You see, they proved everything. It's like digging deep, deep down, to find the foundation of the rock.'

"The words struck home, though Carrie had not the faintest notion of it.

"Then she began to talk about the wedding, which was to be in St. Anselm's, engineered with much pride by Audrey, Ned's wife. Everybody loved Carrie, and all would be glad to do her honor.

"Florrie and the Babe are to be her bridesmaids, and two white satin page boys take her train—Ned's little boy and the son of the Lady Fanshawe, Hubert's sister. Maud has had a new costume for the occasion from the Rue de la Paix, having a chance to show herself on equal terms with the county for the first time. 'It is all very interesting, but what is going to become of Florrie and the Babe?' I asked.

They are to remain on in the old house in the meantime, keeping the two trusted maids who have been with them so long. Cyril will come to them as often as possible, and it will be his real home. But not a word of Maud, or her connection with the family, from whom she has simply cut herself off, so far as any feeling of duty or responsibility is concerned. She claims her full right to live the life she chooses without considering them. All this bright talk has been good for us, and we had a delightful tea-hour. I felt a kind of envy of Carrie as we watched her go off on her lover's arm. She is so proud, because immediately they return from their honeymoon they have to go on an electioneering campaign. Hubert is standing for the Norfolk constituency his maternal grandfather represented so long. I see Carrie, with her demure, bewitching face smiling on platforms beside her lover-husband; I can even picture her a power in a London political drawing room. It is all delightful. It lifts me up to meet real happiness. These two will never be disappointed in one another. As Carrie says, their house is built on the rock.

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"We are all at home at Grey Gables again. Jane is occupying the blue spare room, but though I have pointed out to her the advantages of the nursery wing, and the possibilities of the third room as a den for herself, she only shakes her head.

"I wonder whether she knows that Gilbert is opposed to the idea of her making a permanent home with us? He was rather cross about it, but could not

find any valid reason why she should n't stay on, except that stupid one that married people are best alone. When anybody is as much alone as I have been all these years, almost any companionship is welcome. I remember a long time ago reading an extraordinary article in one of those weird, ephemeral papers which spring up and record all sorts of unchronicled things. It was called 'An Unsuspected Danger of Suburban Life.' Struck by the title, I read on, and the thing left a bad taste in my mouth. It pointed out the loneliness and isolation of the ordinary suburban wife—the hours she is left alone, a prey to her own morbid thoughts, and to any chance temptation. It showed up how many hours she could spend gadding about London, ostensibly shopping—her only concern to get back in time to receive her husband at night. The article called for account of all these foolish and wasted hours, and uttered a warning to the complacent and unsuspecting husbands. The whole tone of the article was objectionable, and I felt that it was wholly unjustified and unnecessary. But there was just the germ of truth in it. It is true that a great many women, partially educated, and with no very exalted views of life, bent only on having a good time, especially in the few years when they are most attractive themselves, and quick to appreciate attraction in others, may be tempted to philandering away from their homes. There is so little to prevent it. Half the time now Gilbert never dreams of asking what I have been doing with myself during the long days he

is absent in the city. He vaguely supposes, I think, that I go out to tea and attend meetings.

"There is something about it all not quite normal or as it ought to be. If Grey Gables were full of boys and girls, it would all be so different; we would have so many to think about and work and plan for. Every moment would be full, every faculty engaged to its utmost capacity. We have too much money, and our minds too much leisure. Also we have become independent of one another. I am obliged to order my days without reference to Gilbert. He so seldom needs or wants me. When he is not at the bank he is attending company meetings in such places as the Cannon Street Hotel, or dinners of financial men. He is talking of joining a Syndicate at present, which wants to exploit mines in Siberia. Some men came to golf and lunch here one Sunday—it is long since Gilbert started Sunday golf—and they talked of nothing else. When we got out from lunch, Jane made me get dressed and go for a tramp over Hampstead Heath with her. When we came round by the White Stone Pond the Salvation Army was holding a meeting, and the singing drew us. We stood still and listened, and presently joined in. It was that lovely old hymn:

'When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died!'

It was only crude singing, and the band did not strike in tune, but it had a certain rude impressiveness. It stirred us both. I saw that Jane's eyes were full of tears as we turned away.

"'They've got hold of the real thing, Hessie,' she said quietly. 'There isn't a doubt but that the Cross is the lever, the only one that really counts or matters——'

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"Jane likes the Yuills, and they like her. She very often goes across to The Yews without me. I have a little innocent plot in my heart for her—that she should marry Andrew; then Christina would go back to her dear Glen Isla. I have always thought it would be a lovely arrangement; now I am simply determined it must come to pass. Just think what it would mean to me to have Jane in the house opposite, to know I could get her at a moment's notice! Gilbert says it will never happen, and advises me to keep off match-making. He seems just lately to dislike Mr. Yuill more and more, and to find nothing good to say about him. We have been discussing holidays, and it seems that Gilbert may have to take part of his in going to Russia on the Syndicate's business. How I should love to go to Russia, to polish up my French, and see my old friend Claire Destinn, who is a resident governess in the family of one of the Archdukes—I think I shall ask Gilbert to take me when he speaks of it again.

"He came in one day very much pleased because he had travelled out in the train with Mr. Yuill and he had invited him to Glen Isla in August.

"'I never was more surprised in my life, Kid, for I thought the immaculate and pious Andrew was as much off me as I was off him. Would you like to go?'

"I said at once that I should simply love it.

"'I told him I rather thought you and Jane were going off somewhere on your own this summer. But it seems he doesn't want us till August. I dare say it can be arranged.'

"'Did he say anything about Jane?' I asked eagerly.

"'The invitation included her.'

"I clapped my hands.

"'Oh, Gilbert, that *will* be nice—so much nicer than spending our holidays apart.'

"'Were we going to do that?' he asked whimsically. 'Only a part of them, I think. It's a dead cert that I'll have to take two weeks with the Syndicate at Petersburg.'

"'Take me, Gilbert. I have always wanted to see Russia. I speak French perfectly, and I might be a help——'

"He shook his head and looked away—anywhere but at me.

"'Can't be done, Hessie. They'd kick at the idea of a woman joining the party. You see, it's pure dry business and nothing else, chiefly kicking our heels in ante-rooms belonging to officials trying to get near the Czar.'

"'Then why is Maud Lacy going?'

"The words were out before I could help myself, and I felt my cheeks burning, my hands hot, and trembling too.

"'Who said she was going?'

"'Cyril told us last Sunday. He seemed very much surprised at it.'

"'I shall have to talk to Cyril. He's a meddling young ass,' said Gilbert, still looking away. 'She has spoken about it, but nothing is settled. She's interested in the venture, and prepared to put money in it. It was Cardigan who started the idea of her going. He's great on the value of a woman's intuition.'

"I knew that Gilbert was not telling me the truth, that all along he had lied to me about Maud Lacy. I could not say another word.

"When he spoke again his voice had an eager, uneasy ring.

"'Don't worry your head about things you don't understand, and which don't matter in the very least. If I go to Russia at all, it will only be to pacify the others, and take a sort of inventory of the situation; I can't afford to kick my heels in ante-rooms. It's for millionaires like Cardigan. I don't for a moment expect that Miss Lacy will go. It will be too slow for her. If you and Jane fix on your summer quarters, I'll come and join you for a fortnight and give you the time of your lives. Have you thought of a place? I've heard that the golf is very good at Le Touquet.'

"'Jane has written to the convent at St. Jacques, asking if they can take us for a few weeks. Miss Yuill may go with us, but nothing is settled.'

"I walked out of the room as I spoke, for my heart was too sore, my spirit too perturbed to bear it any longer. We did not speak of it again until Jane heard definitely from St. Jacques and we had to arrange our

dates. Gilbert then told me in front of her, and I imagined a touch of defiance in his voice, that he was leaving for Russia with the Syndicate the day after us.

"Gilbert and his sister have not been getting on well together of late. There is a sort of cold hostility in their manner toward one another, and Gilbert has told me that what he calls the 'three-cornered' arrangement must cease after the holidays. I shall miss her frightfully, but I see that perhaps it will be best.

"Babette leaves us for good to marry her Grenoble farmer in October. Agnes will go home to Scotland for her holiday, and we shall pick her up on our way back from Brean. The young housemaid is taking another situation to 'better herself,' and my household seems to have become disintegrated of its own accord. We leave Grey Gables in charge of Ricketts, the gardener, and his wife, and they will look after my dear dogs, Crony and Mac.

"It seems terrible to have written so many pages in this journal without mentioning the Scotch terriers Christina gave me as a Christmas present for the first Christmas at Grey Gables. They were bred at Brean, and have long pedigrees. They are such dears, so wise and thoughtful and loyal, with their pathetic eyes and dignified characters. Some might think it absurd to speak of a dog's dignity, but my two have more dignity than many humans I have met. They are devoted to me and to Gilbert. But I am sure he would make more of them if they had

come from anybody but the Yuills. They are very unhappy these days, feeling the unrest of the house, and resenting our frequent visits and consultations in the box room.

"We return for one night only to get warmer clothes for Glen Isla, to which we go in the first week of August. There will be a small house-party there, which will be quite a new experience for me. Jane is looking forward to it too. She is most frightfully sisterly and kind to me in these days, thinking evidently that I need taking care of. It has amused me to discover that she thinks I am not strong. Sometimes I have an odd fluttering at my heart, and I can't go quickly upstairs. Always now there seems to be more or less of a weight just there—at my heart, I mean. Perhaps I have brooded too much. All the time I have such a feeling of insecurity, as if my house had no right foundation. My husband has told me so many things which I have afterwards found not to be true, that now I cannot believe him as I used to. It is always about little things, about where he has been, and the hours he keeps, and then I wonder why he cannot be quite honest about it. I have never been a grisling woman, or one to reproach him. I have always understood that men must have latitude in all their movements, that any sort of espionage, even if it only arises out of a woman's love, raises the devil in them. I have seen it once or twice just lately in Gilbert's eyes, and it has made me very, very quiet. My heart is very tired, surely, and its sadness is absolute.

"For I have failed in the very place where I ought to have succeeded. For what is the use of religion to a woman unless it can sanctify her own home, and doubly bless those she loves? There must be something wrong with mine, that I have walked beside my husband all these years without making the smallest impression. He cares far, far less for all the things that matter than he did at the beginning. Surely the fault is mine. On this the last night in my home for a time I pray God once more to show me the way, to make it so clear that I cannot possibly get astray. Just lately I have felt that God does not help women enough — does not reveal the purpose of life sufficiently to them. But, again, in all this there may be some hidden purpose which I shall know one day. This morning, in a little anthology of verse somebody sent me last Christmas, I found this, and it serves for a moment's comfort. It was written by the Norwegian poet Björnson:

"'Rejoice when thou dost see
God take thy things from thee;
When thy props are laid low,
And friend turns to foe;
'Tis but because now
God seeth that thou
No longer on crutches must go.
Each here
Whom he setteth alone,
He Himself is most near.'"

CHAPTER XXII

"I am writing this sitting on an old gnarled bench in the courtyard of the convent at St. Jacques. It is so beautiful and so restful here, it seems sufficient to be alive. Jane and Christina have gone down to bathe, and I envy them so much; but it is better for me not to go with them. We all made rather fetching bathing-gowns before we left Finchley, but I have only worn mine once. I felt so ill after my first experience of the sea, though it was so kindly, that they have never allowed me to go in again.

"We all like life in the convent very much, though sometimes it makes us feel rather like little girls at school.

"We are cared for and waited on by the sweet-faced, soft-voiced nuns, and everything goes on just like clockwork. The routine does not fret us in the least; we have come for a rest, and there is nothing here to hinder. Some of the visitors dislike it very much, however, and the talkative American woman's husband, after four days, broke into open rebellion, and has gone away to Paris.

"I don't think she minds at all; in fact, she has just been telling me that it is a relief not to have him 'around,' as she expresses it. These Americans seem

so queer and detached in their matrimonial ideas.

"I am quite alone here in the quiet, sunny courtyard, for after breakfast every one naturally goes to the beach or on to the little *plage*. Once or twice a nun glides across the soft grass, but she does not seek to interrupt me even by a smile. They have a reverence for silence. One feels that in their own lives they have proved its value to the uttermost. There is such peace on their faces that one can hardly help envying them. Sister Agathe, who has just glided by to the refectory, looks as if she had passed through all kinds of poignant experiences and had conquered them all.

"I wonder whether the religious life, as these sisters understand it, is not, after all, the best for some women? They give their whole lives to the care and service of others, and are at least immune from certain kinds of suffering. Neither Jane nor Christina Yuill will allow me to speak like that. Miss Yuill has all the old Presbyterian dislike and distrust of what she calls Papists, though I think, since we came here, her views have become a good deal modified.

"That I think is not to be wondered at, as it would not be possible to live under the same roof with these devoted women without learning to reverence their saintliness, their love for the poor, and their complete surrender of themselves to the service of others.

"We live the simple life indeed, getting up early, eating plain food, which, however, is always

temptingly cooked and served, and calculated to teach even the most successful and ambitious housewives the value of little things.

"We go to bed at nine, when the convent gates are shut, and everybody has to be indoors. It was the shutting of the gates against which the American kicked. He said he guessed he didn't reckon to pay seven dollars a week for the privilege of being shut up in jail.

"I am rather afraid that Gilbert would be of the American's opinion if he had to submit to these regulations, against which there is no appeal. He has arrived at St. Petersburg, and I have had two letters rather full of his experiences. He devotes a good deal of space to descriptions of St. Petersburg, with the dignity and beauty of which he seems much impressed.

"He does not write very hopefully about the business of the Syndicate. It seems to be a very slow and difficult process getting anywhere near the Czar. He also says that Cardigan, at least, will have to take up his quarters indefinitely at St. Petersburg, and simply await the Czar's pleasure. Can it be worth while, one wonders, even for the sake of making more money? All the members of the Syndicate are rich men already. I suppose my own husband is the poorest, and now we cannot spend the half of what he makes. What is the use of it all? I keep asking myself. So far as I have been able to discover, none of them put it to any useful purpose; they simply spend it on their own selfish enjoyment,

trying to get what they call 'a good time,' which, being interpreted, means getting more and more things for themselves. Yet none of them seem to be happy. I have seen them all, and listened to their talk, and they only seem dissatisfied because they can't invent new ways of getting money. Gilbert has become infected with this fearful restlessness, and seems to be happy only when he is what he calls full of business. He is quite as bad as the American millionaires we read about, who have sacrificed everything in the pursuit of wealth.

"Human beings can't have been intended to live like that, even a section of them. There are implanted in every one of us certain yearnings after the infinite, and when we voluntarily crush them, as most of these men seem to do, why, then, we are so much the poorer that there are no words adequate to express our poverty.

"The saddest part of it all is that they are all quite unconscious of their own poverty, but are convinced that they are splendid, clever fellows, getting the utmost out of life.

"There are so many differing standards of living, and every individual is convinced that his or her standard is the best.

"It is all very confusing, and sometimes one's heart gets quite tired.

"Gilbert has not said anything about coming to St. Jacques. In his last letter he laid a good deal of stress on the slow progress of the Russian mission, and how most of them hate to be kicking their heels

in a baking capital instead of taking a normal holiday.

"He has not mentioned Maud Lacy's name, but somehow I seem to know inside of me that she is there.

"It is very terrible for one human being to feel toward another as I do toward Maud Lacy. It is so like hatred that it could not truly be called by any other name.

"The Bible says quite distinctly and clearly that 'whoso hateth his brother is a murderer.' Not one extenuating circumstance is allowed.

"Sometimes it is very hard to follow in the steps of Jesus; poor human nature is not capable of rising spontaneously to such heights. I have tried to be sorry for Maud Lacy, to pity her for all she is missing in life; then the woman part of me rises in revolt, and tells me she gets all she wants or cares for in the world, simply because she thinks of no one but herself. And I go without. There are days when I wish almost passionately that I had been born, if not like her, at least less sensitive. Gilbert has more than once called me morbid. Once when I was feeling unusually bitter, I retorted that if I was really morbid, then he had made me so. It is only in the last few years, since I have slowly parted with confidence in him, that I have become a prey to morbid thoughts. God alone knows how hard I have tried to fight against it all!

"But outside forces seem too strong for me. Just lately I have become quite conscious of a strange

weakening of the will, a disposition to let everything drift. I might liken myself to a ship that has been so long buffeted by adverse winds that it has lost the power of resistance. Perhaps it is only that I am a little run down and out of health. Both Jane and Christina persist in treating me as if I were a sort of invalid, and somehow I just let them; but so ungrateful and unappreciative are we sometimes that I would give all their cosseting for one hour, just one of the old jolly hours of comradeship with Gilbert. Now I am crying a little, which Jane has absolutely forbidden. I shall put this away and take a little walk on the *plage;* perhaps I shall meet them coming back from their dip. The letters have come in, and there are two for Christina. I had better take them to her.

"A letter has arrived from Mr. Yuill, and he is coming to St. Jacques to-morrow. Christina read out a bit of his letter in which he says London is a howling wilderness without us all, and that he wishes it was time to go to Brean.

"'He asks very specially for you, Mrs. Trent,' she said. 'When he comes to-morrow he'll see for himself what a poor jimpy crater you are getting. It is indeed high time we had you at Brean to try and put a bit of flesh on your bones.'

"I just laughed as I always did at Christina's quaint phraseology, but when we got back to the convent, and went to our rooms to tidy ourselves for *dejeuner*, I could not help seeing in the queer little convex mirror on the wall, which is all I have to dress

by, that I really am much thinner than I used to be or have ever been.

"I hope Gilbert won't mind, but most probably he will never notice it at all. This morning, when I awoke, a horrible thought presented itself to my mind and positively refused to go away. I felt so worn out and so little inclined to get up that quite suddenly I began to wonder whether I might be going into a decline.

"Then Gilbert would be free and would marry Maud Lacy and take her to our dear home, and she would have all my things and turn them over and criticize all its arrangements and laugh at my old-maidish ways. And, above all, she would have Gilbert. It was such a hateful thought that I jumped out of bed immediately, and began to dress quite fast, telling myself such a thing should never happen. I repeated it, as I looked at my thin pale cheeks in the little old mirror, and made up my mind to ask Sister Agathe immediately for quantities of cream to drink so that I may get quite fat before I see Gilbert again.

"It is quite delightful having Mr. Yuill here. He is so big and strong and wholesome. I see all the women losing their hearts to him on the spot. We tease him dreadfully because the talkative American has annexed him, or rather has tried very hard. He is certainly very clever at getting rid of her, without giving the smallest offence. All the old people and the children are devoted to him, which I always think is the supreme test of a man.

"He does not in the least mind the convent life, and just laughs at the idea that we are all shut in at night, behind the big gates, like children that need to be kept out of mischief. He organized all sorts of delightful excursions while he was here, and we were very sorry when on the fifth day he said he would have to go to Paris to meet a man on business.

"He is just as full of affairs as Gilbert, but somehow he does not convey the impression that there is nothing else worth while in the world. He has always time for other things.

"He asked me only once whether I was expecting Gilbert, and when I started out to explain how the Syndicate might keep him for the greater part of his holiday, he made his lips into a long thin line, what we call his 'Scotch mouth.' We all went in the diligence with him to the station, and our next meeting will, if all goes well, be at Glen Isla.

"I do love to watch the village women here. They seem to talk so little and to think so much. I have had a good many chats with them, and my fluent French is, I believe, the only possession which Jane envies me. It certainly makes a very great difference to one's enjoyment of a place like this. Some of the women have such sad faces, but when one talks to them they are not in the least sad. Their faith is so amazing, in its way almost sublime. Yet they live in great poverty, dependent on the sea, which is not always kind.

"One woman to whom I have talked a great deal has lost her husband and three sons at sea, yet her

face is quite sunshiny, and she talks with simple reverence about 'le bon Dieu,' Who doeth all things well.

. . . . . .

"Mr. Yuill left us at noon on Thursday, and about six next evening Gilbert arrived without any warning. Jane and Christina had gone for a day's excursion with some of the people stopping in the convent, and I was sitting all by myself in a sheltered nook I had discovered on the bents. I had just looked at my watch, and, seeing that it was nearly six, I began to roll up my work. And when I turned round, lo! there was Gilbert! It made me feel quite foolish for a moment. I had been thinking about him, of course — when do I not think about him? but somehow I had got resigned to the idea that he would not come to St. Jacques.

"His greeting was very grave, but I felt so ridiculously glad to see him that after a minute or two he drew me down on the bents and we began to talk of everything that has happened in the last three weeks. He told me a good deal about St. Petersburg, and how he had travelled twenty miles into the country to see Claire Destinn, just because he thought it would please me. He was not successful, however, only arriving at the Grand Duke's country house to hear that they had all gone away to his summer palace in the Caucasus.

"I did not mind in the least that he did not see Claire; the mere fact that he thought of it and wanted to do it for my sake made me ridiculously happy. All my fears and distrust seemed to die a

natural death, and I didn't care for anything except that I had got my husband back.

"When we got up to walk back to the convent, I told him that he had just missed Mr. Yuill by a few hours. But he made me no answer, and there was the queerest look on his face.

"I can't tell how proud I felt at the dinner table that night, when Gilbert and I entered the *salle a manger* together, and everybody looked at us; he is so big and handsome, and I have never seen him look better. Certainly his holiday has done him the greatest possible good.

"All my morbid imaginings have disappeared, and I am going to be as happy as I know how in the next few days. I do hope Gilbert will like this place; I could be so happy with him here. He seemed in great spirits at dinner, and kept the whole table lively. The American woman was very amusing about him when we were having coffee in the court-yard.

"'Say, however have you kept so plum silent about that husband of yours?'

"I replied that I did not think anybody would be interested in hearing about a man they had never seen.

"'That's just where you make a mistake. And I tell you what, if he belonged to me, I'd take good care that I didn't let him too long out of my sight. Now with our Popper it's quite different. Nobody would ever want to run off with him.'

"I made Gilbert laugh a little over it, but already he is not inclined to laugh much. We spent all the

morning together on the sand dunes, while Jane and Miss Yuill very considerately went off on another expedition. Before the day was over, he said he had had enough of St. Jacques, and that we should start out for London next day.

"I felt rather distressed at this, and tried to point out that it was not quite kind to break up the party like that.

"Then he was quite horrid, and said that if I preferred them to him, I was at perfect liberty to stop, but that he was leaving in the morning. Then I spoke about our coming visit to Glen Isla, and that we could not be so rude and inconsiderate to Miss Yuill.

"'I'm not going to Scotland this year; I've had all the holiday I want, or am likely to get.'

"I know I must have looked blankly dismayed at this, but all the while he did not look at me.

"'You can go to Scotland, of course. It is you they want, anyhow. Where the Yuills are concerned, I'm nothing more than an appendage.'

"Something has happened, and everything is all wrong again.

"We return to London to-morrow.

. . . . . .

"I am writing this at Glen Isla, and for the moment all my past life seems like a dream.

"I am unable to account for this strange detachment of spirit which has cut me off from all that made me suffer.

"It is not merely that my husband and I are

parted by nearly five hundred miles of distance; it is something which has little connection with the things of time. I feel somehow as if I were done with it all, as if nothing could have the power to hurt or vex me any more.

"It cannot mean that I am going to die, for I have never felt better in my life. They all tease me about getting fat, and I have got such a color in my face. Perhaps it is the spell of this place. It is very wonderful, and Christina did not say half enough about it.

"It would not be possible for me to attempt any description of it. I should have to search about for fresh words. The only two that seem at all adequate are majesty and peace.

"It is as if the peace which passes understanding had sunk into my soul.

"Nothing mean or small or sordid can live in these noble solitudes, which are as fresh from the hand of God as when He gave them first. I spend hours on the hill behind the house alone, and now they don't seek to hinder me, I suppose because they have discovered that there is nothing morbid in my love for solitude, and that I can be gay with the best of them when we 'foregather' (Christina's word) at the dinner table or about the big hall fire at night. I am not able to take long tramps with the guns, even if I could bear to see them kill things.

"I have found my soul again in this beautiful spot, or, to put it more simply, my soul has found its way back to God.

"I have no more desire even to question any of the happenings of my life. I seem to know that each one, even the most poignant, has been necessary.

"Wonder of wonders! I can even think without bitterness of the woman who has been my thorn in the flesh all these years.

"Even she has been permitted, in order that something might be completed in me. Perhaps too much happiness would not have been good for me. I might have grown hard and selfish without any understanding of the need and suffering of others. For instance, I should not have been able to enter into the trouble of poor Mrs. Arkwright unless I had gone part of that difficult way.

"I had a letter from her yesterday, quite cheerful and hopeful, in which she says she thinks things are going better in her home.

"She has every hope of winning her husband back again, and speaks of his gentleness and consideration toward her and the children, but especially toward her.

"She makes far too much of the little I did for her, and tells me she never goes to sleep a single night without praying God to spare me many years, and give me my heart's desire.

"What is my heart's desire now, I wonder? Everything seems to have fallen away from my restless heart, leaving only peace.

"I have had only one prayer all these years since I knew I must not ask for another child—that God would give me my husband's soul, and that I might

yet taste the supreme happiness of kneeling by his side in the prayer and worship which his voice would lead.

"But even that I can leave now, for God has revealed Himself to me here, and I know that He has undertaken for me.

. . . . . .

"To understand the Scotch fully, one has to see them at home in their own country. The Yuills are perfectly delightful here.

"They keep an almost feudal style, and all their people seem absolutely devoted to them. What I like best of all the household arrangements is when we gather morning and evening for what they call 'worship' in the big hall. All the servants and guests come, and nobody is excused unless they are ill. It is such a fine beginning and ending to the day, and gives one such a feeling of security and peace.

"Yet people talk as if religion made people dull. What a mistake and a libel it is! There could not possibly be a jollier house than this. I have not laughed so much for years. I do hope nothing will happen to prevent Gilbert coming, at least for a week-end. It would be so good for him to see it all. When I come to think of it, they have never said a word about his visit since I came, though Christina heard him promising me at King's Cross that he would be sure to come.

"Probably he told Andrew privately that there is no chance of his getting away again, and they think it kinder to me not to speak about it.

"I had also a letter this morning from Mrs. Jermyn. She is taking the Women's Meeting while I am away, and writes to tell me how she got on on Monday. She also has far too many kind things to say about my work. If it is all true, that they miss me so much, and only bear my absence because it is going to give me fresh strength for the coming winter, why, then, isn't life greatly worth living? How ungrateful and unfaithful I have been! I deserve nothing but to be classed with the doubters of whom Thomas was the chief.

"I did not have a letter from Gilbert to-day, but I shall have one to-morrow in answer to the one I wrote him sitting on the hillside right high among the heather. I was so pleased because I had a little spray of white heather to send him for luck. I found it all by myself, which one has to do, or it has not the same significance. Christina says it has become very scarce in Glen Isla of late years. People are such vandals in their eagerness to get it, they think nothing of dragging it away by the roots. I cut out my dear little sprig very carefully, and put it inside the page of my letter. I think it was a nice one I wrote. Somehow I felt sunshiny inside, and I just poured out my heart and told him he must come to Glen Isla to be made young again.

"To-day I have been thinking such a lot about my little son. In my reading to-day I came across that lovely promise about the boys and girls playing about the street of the heavenly city.

"Mine is there among them, and when I get there too I shall know him. Then all this hunger of the heart will die away, and I shall take my place among the joyful mothers of children.

"I somehow think that God will remember how empty my arms were here, and fill them full. I should like to take care of the little lonely children till their own mothers come.

"Just to-day, sitting here on this gray boulder among the heather with the hills behind and around, the glen with its tumbling stream at my feet, and the illimitable sky overhead, it is all so near and real that almost it might happen any day."

Here the journal ends, for before twenty-four hours had passed her dream was realized, and all the loneliness of her spirit, the anguish of a misplaced trust, were swallowed up in victory.

What more can, need I, say? It is all over, save the hell I have created for myself.

. . . . . .

Six months have elapsed, and I am passing these sheets for the Press.

In the interval I have given them to Jane to read, and she has approved my desire to give this story, Hester's and mine, to the world. But mercifully she has had very little to say.

She has been more than kind, and has remained on in this sad house when she had the world to choose from, and could have been happier elsewhere.

To-day she has told me something which has

surprised me very much. She is going to marry Andrew Yuill.

"Of course, it was Hester he cared for, and would have given his life for any day. That is why he has never been able to see you or to come here. Hester is the bond between us; she wanted us to marry."

I muttered something about the risks of marrying for any such motive; but Jane only smiled.

"Neither of us is young, Gibbie, and I think we won't expect too much. Anyway, we are going to try it, and Christina is a great deal better pleased than if she had been going to marry herself."

So in a few weeks' time I shall be once more alone, and all the busy world of men and things will go on precisely as if nothing had happened.

"Will you stop on in this big house, do you think, Gibbie?" asked Jane, looking at me with great kindliness.

"I will never leave it," I answered, and some of the anguish of my soul found expression in my voice.

It was a few moments before she answered:

"I am glad, Gibbie; this house belongs to Hester, and some day I feel sure she will bring you a message from the other side."

. . . . . .

It is the hope in which I live.